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Art credits:

Front cover:	TACS
Back cover:	Ellen Siders
Hostages:	Denise Logan

Apologies for a layout problem in "Hostages of Fortune". With repeated computer crashes, I was lucky to preserve the text. The bizarre gaps are the result of trying to salvage what I can and still get this zine out in relative time.

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This zine can be ordered from: Bill Hupe and Peg Kennedy, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI 48854.

Editorial

Whew!! Just when I thought I was getting ahead on the zine...

Lots of events have happened since the publication of *On the Wings of the Knight 1*. Forever Knight was renewed... and cancelled again. Bill and I crashed not just one but two computers (something about letting that stupid time battery go dead, and it just takes the entire mother board with it...). Contributions already typed on computer were completely and utterly inaccessible -- unfortunately I am only becoming aware exactly how many I've lost by just talking to people -- very sorry, Sandy Hall!

Oddly enough, I was surprised on how popular the cross-over of Forever Knight and Highlander was. "Hostages of Fortune" was originally twenty pages of draft and several pages of outlines. Seeing how juicy this piece was, I made the judgment call to hold the issue until I received the novella in its entirety... four days before MediaWest*Con 1996! But I'm sure you'll think it's worth the read.

Many thanks to all who were patient for this issue, and thanks to everyone who felt *On the Wings of the Knight 1* deserved the Fan-Q for best Forever Knight zine.

THE COST OF LIVING

Daniel Van De Wiele

"Don't... you don't know what you're getting into."

She smiled, shrugging off his plea. "I can help you make the pain go away."

He tried protesting as her lips met his, her tongue snaked into her mouth. He attempted to pull away, but his body betrayed him. Pushing her back, he stopped. Spasms shook him and he coughed uncontrollably.

She paused until he regained control.

"You don't understand," he gasped as bile welled in his throat.

"But I know what you need," she purred the two dropped onto the couch. Taking a sip of wine, she offered him the taste from her lips. He savored the dry, sweet flavor as she removed his shirt. Her hands felt icy cold against his warm chest.

Stepping back to admire her body, tears welling, he paused, trying to argue... to protest. She was so beautiful. Her gold-flecked emerald eyes glowed. Her hair danced in radiant glory from the lamp's light giving an all-true illusion of an angel of mercy.

"Stop."

She paused momentarily, waiting for him to tell her to leave. But there was no indication he wanted that. She pushed him onto his back with her body.

"I... I'm dying." He turned to avoid her reaction. -- so sure it would be one of disgust and betrayal, the betrayal he felt when he discovered the fact.

Her hands guided him to her. "I know." She caressed his face and slowly guided his head to her neck. "I can help you stop hurting." With a mother's instinct, she rocked him to sleep. Humming a soft lullaby, the seductress became his friend.

He glanced up at her, and she nodded, wiping a strand of wild hair back off his face. "Everything will be better, soon."

"Why couldn't I have met you before?" he murmured, dozing off.

He never felt the razor slit his neck.

* * *

"Happy birthday, Janette." Nick Knight paused, breathing in her sweet scent as he kissed her bare-gloved hand. Delicately, she retrieved it.

Her crystal blue eyes devoured him. Hers was an ageless beauty -- most assuredly French. Nick was continually amazed at how she effortlessly maintained her European charm in a place where such style was unheard of... or considered old-fashioned.

"Thank you, Nicholas," Janette purred. "It is so nice of you to remember. We haven't seen you around lately." Delicately she lifted her drink. "Care for one or are you on duty?"

"I'm off tonight." He watched the wine's shimmering redness as she handed him the goblet. Accepting the drink, he held it to the light. The cut crystal glass was filled with a wine-blood mixture -- more blood than wine -- a particular potion Janette retained so she wouldn't have to hunt. "So... how old are you?"

"You know better than to ask a lady her age."

"To your health, then. You don't look a day over two hundred."

"Flattery will get you everywhere." She lit a cigarette, noticing her friend's displeasure. "What do you want, Nicholas?"

"There's been another murder," he reported flatly. "Another one with AIDS..."

"He would have died anyway," she puffed, looking around the club. "The one thing I could never stomach was a drink that was sick. If they don't kill themselves one way, they find another." Janette

paused, snuffing out the cigarette and locking her eyes on Nick's. "Is this what you want to be? Mortal? Frail? Subject to death because of love?"

England, October 1815

Surrounding him where people crying and sobbing. Most attempted to ignore the filthy stench permeating around them like an old wooden blanket. To Nick they were gray swaths dulling the stained-yellow walls polluting the once-pristine look of the hospital. They were no better than dirt.

His boots' measured click was the only noise he heard. *One last time.* He continued to march to the predestined location. *I owe her that much.*

Putting his hand on the faded wood, he attempted to bring a ray of hope to his face to hide the hollowness inside. His heightened senses were assaulted by waste odors left to rot. Coughing back a gag, he stepped through the doorway.

"I thought you would never return." Marie weakly lifted her head.

"I couldn't let you go without saying good-bye," Nick responded. Silently, he locked the door behind himself. Her sunken eyes and yellow skin made her look more like a skeleton than the young woman she was. Cholera did not distinguish between good and bad people. It struck them all. So many had died. So many more would.

Irony, he thought to himself, she was one of the few who insisted on staying to help ease others' pain -- even though she knew there was little to do. "They were dying and no one should die alone," she had often told him.

Then the disease attacked Marie. Nobody ventured near her. Those she helped turned their backs, cast her out and left her to rot. Some said it was "God's will." After all, she had helped those street harlots and sailors down by the docks.

Nick attempted to cheer her up. From the way her heart was beating, he knew she'd be gone by morning.

"I brought you these," he offered her a dandelion bouquet. "I know how much you love them."

"They remind me of the sun." Her features darkened as she looked from the flowers to the dirt-stained window and, finally, they locked on her wraith-like hands. "I don't want to die."

Nick wanted to respond but couldn't. The pain he had tried to shield from her crept across his face.

"Get out!" Her lisp cracked as she screamed. It wasn't louder than a gasp, but Nick understood. "Or take me with you."

Nick stepped closer, startled by her response. "What?"

"Take me," she pleaded. "Kill me. I can't bear the pain any longer."

"Nick paused. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Yes... I do." Acid tears streamed down her face. "Make me like you or I will kill myself."

Nick turned from her. He shouldn't have come back. Glancing down, he paused. "Perhaps..."

He felt her hand on his shoulder. Spinning him around with a final burst of energy, she kissed him one last time. He could smell her blood and feel it cry out to his hunger. It screamed for a cure -- any cure.

With animalistic speed, the decision was made. Clamping onto her neck, he drained her former life.

She froze and slowly, instinctively, she bit his neck in response.

Blood passed as their memories merged. The thoughts hidden in their mind's darkest reaches lie exposed. Their heartbeats weakened to near death. Nick felt his thirst pull him under.

A dull thud... another... a full pulse... *life.*

With her new-found strength, she rose to her feet and examined herself in the mirror's reflection -- a cold reminder of before -- and watched as the cracks in her lips disappeared and the spark in her eyes returned.

"We must get away," Nick ordered, opening the window.

"Yes," she agreed, leaving her stained robe behind. "That smells of death. Give me your coat."

Nick offered her his black cloak which looked better than her sick-stained gown. The cloak heightened her features.

"Now I have work to do," she wrapped the belt to her slender waist.

"Let me come with you."

"No, sweet Nicholas," she gently wiped a wisp of his hair back into place. "There is something I must do alone. We'll rendezvous before the sun comes up."

Circa Today

Beep.

"hello. This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message after the beep."

"Nick. This is Nat. We found another body this morning -- same as the others. I should have some answers when you get up. Try something warm... it'll make you feel better."

Nick listened half-heartedly to her message. She was always striving for him to get "better". Ever since discovering him on the slab, she had tried... even, he thought to himself, when I didn't.

He opened the icebox and glanced at a small package of raw hamburger wrapped with a red ribbon. Instead of grabbing it, he opened a bottle of lamb's blood, poured it into a glass, and put it in the microwave for ten seconds.

She was right, he noted silently toasting her with the glass, it did taste better warm.

* * *

Feeling refreshed, he walked into the morgue just in time to hear his partner, Don Schanke, wheedling for any tidbit of information Natalie had.

"C'mon Doc, whatever you tell our 'Golden Boy' you can tell me," he protested as she crossed her arms and sat on the corner of her desk. "It isn't as if we're competing. I've already put in eight hours today. Myra is going to kill me if I don't pick her up at eight to go to that health club tonight."

"But you're the perfect picture of a police officer," Nick teased, walking in.

"That's what I told her," Schanke frowned, unwrapping a lollipop. "But she is determined to help me lose weight -- even if it kills me. First, it was 'stop smoking', then it was garlic tablets..." His eyes twinkled as he noticed Nick's involuntary shudder. "... and now she says I have to lose thirty pounds before my class reunion. Do you know how disgusting a restrictive diet is?"

"Yes," Nick replied quickly as Natalie stifled a chortle. "What do you have?"

"Well, it's about the same as before." Natalie stood up switching to coroner mode. "He was killed by an incision to the jugular. 'Look here,' she turned their attention to the body and lifted the sheet. "Do you see how it was done? Clean and even -- like something Jack the Ripper would do."

"But who wants to hold someone with AIDS?" Schanke grimaced. "Thank God it only happens to gays."

"Remember those women who like to watch at the Raven?" Nick pointedly asked. "They could have it, too. It just isn't men who get it. It's also women and children. There isn't a cure."

"Apparently there is," Natalie covered the body. "He would have lived only a few more days. For him, it ended here."

"Has his family been notified?" Nick glanced at the shrouded form.

"His brother found him," Schanke replied matter-of-factly. "He's not taking it well. His best friend was the first victim."

"We should question him again." He paused for Schanke to agree. "But you need to work that body -- otherwise Myra might find someone thinner."

"You touch her, you're dead meat," Schanke joked, but Nick noticed his partner toss the lollipop into the garbage can.

"Must be nice not to have to watch your weight." Schanke sucked in his stomach. "And I get stuck with the department's 'Most Eligible Bachelor'. Perhaps you and the good doctor here... nyah..."

"Nick," Natalie paused and waited for Schanke to leave.

"There is something else," Nick filled in.

"I knew Stephan," she tried to control her emotions as they cracked through her professional exterior. "He was going to be a doctor until his parents did in a car accident. He and his brother Matt were

devastated. Matt and Jo divorced and Steph couldn't keep his mind on his studies. So he took a break and never came back."

Nick waited. He knew she wanted to say more, but wasn't sure she could find the right words.

Ontario, 1980

"Thanks for inviting them along, Nat," Steph hugged her as they watched Matt and Jo play with a stray dog. "We normally don't get to spend much time together."

"I'm happy they could make it," Nat paused. "I know things have been tough with finals, but now we have a break."

Steph playfully grabbed a handful of freshly-clipped grass and threw it at her. Never one to be one-upped, a grass fight quickly followed. Matt and Jo jumped in and before long, grass was everywhere.

"Okay, stop." Nat tried to catch her breath. "I give up!"

"Yes." Matt and Steph jumped up with their arms in the air as if they had scored the winning goal. "The brothers Howard win again."

Nat and Jo watched as the two paraded around the park singing Queen's "We Are the Champions".

"They're something aren't they?" Jo shook the grass out of her hair. "I wish we could do this more often."

"I know." Nat nodded. "They told us marriages in the medical community are tough. You two are going on two years now, aren't you?"

"Next month." Jo waved to her husband. "I won't lie to you, Nat. It has been tough. Seems either I'm getting home when Matt goes to the Youth Center or Matt comes home while I'm heading to the hospital. Nursing school should have a course in marriage preservation."

"They do." Nat sat up straight imitating one of her least favorite instructors. "You will find yourself under more stress than you've ever known. There will be times when you rely on your classmates for support. But be careful not to fall in love with them; you may not intern in the same place. Or you'll find out you have nothing in common after you leave here. So be careful. More than a third of you will be married before you leave."

"House mother speech number one?"

"You had the lecture, too?" Nat laughed. "Steph never told me... how did you and Matt meet?"

"As a service project, a bunch of us nurses decided to help out at the Youth Center." Jo paused to make sure Steph or Matt wasn't around.

We heard there were some cute guys there. Besides, it was a break from school."

"And..."

"Well, Matt was helping a child who obviously had been beaten. After calling an ambulance, I helped watch him. Matt rode in the ambulance to the hospital and stayed with him until his parents arrived. Afterwards, we went out for coffee. The rest," she opened her arms, "is history."

"So it was love at first sight?"

Natalie picked up a clump of grass and threw it at Jo as she laughed.

"Grass fight!" Steph yelled as he attacked once again.

Circa Today

"We... were... involved at one time," she finally blurted out. "I could have stopped this."

Nick grabbed her shoulders. "Listen. It wasn't your fault. Nor was it his."

She attempted to smile, but her tears flowed freely. "We should talk to his brother Matt. He was all Steph had. They moved in with each other after the accident and divorce. I haven't seen them in a long while. We used to be so close..."

"Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes. I could use a little moral support right now."

* * *

Since his brother's death, Matthew Howard was in a shambles. His waking thoughts this morning were to make something for Steph to eat -- his brother hated hospital food and always seemed to look better after some good home cooking. After whipping a few eggs together and pouring them into a frying pan, he remembered. His eyes blurred as he watched the eggs slowly burn and, like Steph, deteriorate into nothing.

The smell assaulted his nostrils. Racing to the kitchen sink, he vomited a sickly combination of bile and blood. This common occurrence was something he painfully, but quietly, endured for his brother. He knew he was sick, but letting Steph know would have killed him faster. Looking at the blood and vomit in the sink, he realized the cruel joke he had played on himself.

Heading for the shower to clean himself up, he thought about Steph.

"Joanne would've told me to get on with my life," he thought to himself.

Both she and Steph had that hard edge to them. Perhaps it was why they had gotten along so well.

When Joanne left, Steph blamed Matt. Joanne and he had just grown apart. Too much work and too little time together. "We'll keep in touch," Jo had said as she left for the last time. "I still care for you."

Matt felt the same way, but afterwards he threw himself even harder into his work. If he worked until he was dog-tired, he wouldn't have to think about it.

Steph, too, became more and more distant. Matt expected his brother to also leave him. Then Steph met Scott. Because of Scott, the brothers were finally friends again.

Like the two brothers, Scott had lost his parents when they were hit by a drunk driver. It had destroyed Scott's ties with his family. For him there was no going back. He knew Steph and Matt needed each other and he wouldn't let up. Scott made it a personal obsession to ensure these two men gave each other the support they needed.

Scott and Steph had a lot in common. They liked to party hard, drink hard, and chase the same types of women. They also liked to shoot up together.

When Scott was shot up in a bar fight, they had to match his blood type and discovered he was HIV positive. They guessed he got it from a dirty needle, but Matt and Steph both knew otherwise. Scott's sexual prowess was less than desirable in Matt's eyes. But that didn't matter. They were still friends.

Steph found out he was positive, too. He had tried to donate blood and was tested as well.

Water cascaded down as he sat on the shower floor. Tears rolled down his face as he collapsed against the wall. They were all gone, and he was left to pick up the pieces. This time, no one -- not Scott, not Steph, not even his ex-wife Joanne -- was there to help him.

* * *

"Ring it once more," Nick nodded as Natalie began turning away. Pressing the button again, she noticed the door was slightly opening. With a bottle in hand, Matt stepped aside and let the pair in.

"I suppose you're here to provide a little moral support."

"Matt, I'm sorry," she responded, reaching for the bottle. "I know this isn't easy, but you can't drink your life away. He wouldn't have wanted it that way."

"Don't you mean *they*?" Fire blazed in his eyes for a moment as he tried to change his grief into anger.

Stepping back, she paused. "Your parents would have understood. I'm sure you did everything you could."

"Like killing him?"

Nick quickly revealed his badge. "Detective Knight."

"No, Detective, I didn't slit his throat... thought I should have. I introduced him to the person who gave him AIDS." Matt sat down on the couch and put his face in his hands. "I killed him just the same."

England, October 1815

"Ah, Nicholas, it is so wonderful," Marie danced into the chamber. Her skin pulsed with radiance betraying her true age. Obviously, she had just dined.

"You seem well." Nick looked at her from the book he had been reading. "But you must be more careful or they will discover you."

"There is so much left to do." She frowned, reminding him of the little girl he had met so long ago. "They cry out. Their pain calls to me. I feel their suffering."

Nick hugged her from behind as she gazed out the window. Below a woman clothed in an old party dress stood under a street lamp. They watched as she bowed and coughed blood. Hearing the clip-clop of horses drawing a carriage, she attempted to straighten herself. Begging for attention, she asked the men for money -- to help her feed her two little children. The woman was beyond her prime, but she was willing to entertain them.

"I'll show you a good time, M' Lords," she smiled a tooth grin and revealed her breasts. "For a few pounds, I'll make you proud. For a few more, I'll share you both."

"She's dying," Marie watched the men laugh. "Can you hear her heart faltering?"

Nick nodded, taking a final glance at the street. "Get to bed," he brushed her hair to the side as he nibbled her neck. "Let us celebrate the night."

Bending to taste her, Nick bit into air. He looked to the street. He watched with morbid fascination as his lover attacked the woman. Under the lamppost light, she swooped down and took her. There was no scream, only a gasp as the woman died.

Turning from the spectacle, Nick felt her hot breath on the back of his neck. She embraced him with the juices of her kill still on her lips.

Nicholas accepted the offering noting the acrid, metallic taste. He sensed the woman's fear; he could tell from her blood.

"Can you hear it?" Marie paused. "The body's sound freeing itself. It was her gift to me for releasing her. You saved her from the agony she would have. All this because you made me."

Nicholas looked into her eyes and saw her joy. It was intoxicating. He wanted to take her to bed, to ravish her, to feel their bodies' pulse together.

"There is much left to do," Marie pulled away. "I have to free them all. Good bye, my love."

As he started to follow a knock at the door stopped him.

"Nicholas, we have been looking for you," the man with the short-cropped white hair paused. "It is time for you to come with us."

"How did you find me?" Nick spoke in a precise, clipped tone. It was Lucien LaCroix, the one who made him, the one he hated. "I told you I didn't want to see you again."

"Nicholas, my child, you are always running away." LaCroix sat down with a flourish that always seemed to annoy Nick. "What kind of parent would I be if I didn't keep track of my children?"

Nicholas glared at the taller man -- a look LaCroix always chose to ignore, or at least enjoy privately.

"So how is my... granddaughter? I hope she is at least living up to the family name. But, she is like you. She kills for the good of mankind." He placed his hands to his heart. "I don't understand what it is with children these days. They just don't want to do things like their parents. You need not worry about her. There are plenty of bodies in the street. After all, this is the best of time -- especially with all the free food around."

Circa Today

"Do you think he'll be all right?" Nick asked leaving Matt's apartment.

"He'll survive." Nat paused. "But, I think I'd watch him. He would have done anything to help his brother."

"Even kill him?"

"If that's what it took." Nat paused. "But he didn't. I can feel that inside."

* * *

"You need me."

She was a vision in white. Hers was the single, beautiful light in the sterile room. She looked more like Florence Nightingale than the nurses who normally watched him. The others were professional but kept their distance. They knew he was going to die soon. There was nothing he could do except ease the red-hot pain.

"Who are you?" he asked, trying to lift his head from the bed.

"It doesn't matter. What does is that you are going to die." She picked up his chart. "I can take away your pain. All you have to do is ask me."

"Why?"

"Because, it is what I do. I can feel your anger. All you have to do is trust me." She glanced up from the board. "Do you?"

He paused as his lover walked into the room.

"You have it, too." She placed her hand on his. "Are you willing to go through this?"

He cried, avoiding his friend's stare. The shock was too painful for him to acknowledge.

"Was it me?"

He paused trying to find his voice.

"But you tested negative. You look so healthy." Tears rolled down his face. "I thought you'd be spared."

"I know," he sat on the bed.

The two hugged each other. Their relationship had been all they had. There was no family, no other friends. Just the two of them.

"I don't want you to go through this alone," the one said. "You were here for me, but who will you have?"

"I'll have the memory of what we shared."

"Or... we could end this now." He glanced over to the woman. "She would do this for us."

Nodding, she agreed but continued to remain quiet.

"Together?" he asked as he grabbed his lover's hands.

Smiling, the woman in white opened the razor as she removed it from her pocket, "Trust me."

Funny, he thought looking into his friend's eyes. Other than the initial cut, there was not pain. Slipping off into bliss, he felt two pinpricks.

It was done. They were no longer alone.

* * *

"Nick, we've got something!" Schanke shouted over the massive muddle of police officers in the tiny hospital room. "The perp left this behind." He held up an old-style razor blade covered with blood. "Nasty little fella, isn't it?" He matter-of-factly dropped it into a plastic bag. "Nobody was seen entering the room." He took a breath of fresh air as Nick closed the door behind them. "The staff is in an uproar. Perhaps you can calm them down."

Nick nodded as he put on his nonchalant face.

"Detective Knight," he held up his badge. The nurse looked as if she had been on duty for more than a few shifts. Her eyes were masked with black rings -- running on more than a few cups of coffee.

"Do you mind answering a few questions?"

"No," she half attempted to smile. "Perhaps we could sit over here where it's a little more private."

Feeling left behind, Schanke returned to the dead patient's room and began dodging police officers, looking for his target -- the photographer.

"Okay. Okay. Stop gawking. It isn't like we haven't done this before," Schanke smiled, grabbing the photographer's camera. "That's right, get it to work with you..."

* * *

"They were special here." Nurse Joanna Harrison paused, accepting a coffee cup from Nick. "Both took time to make others feel better. It was interesting watching them together. They worked in tandem -- if one needed help, the other was there."

"Did anyone want to kill them?" Nick asked, sitting down. "Did they have any enemies?"

"Just three... or one, now," she weighed her words carefully. "There were two brothers and a friend. They hated gays. They blamed them for getting HIV in the first place."

Nick felt a stirring in his stomach as he recognized where he had seen the woman's photograph. "What were their names?" He hoped she wouldn't say the names he knew she would.

"My ex-husband Matt Howard, his brother Stephan and their buddy Scott Gold."

"But why would they do this?" Nick asked. "Matt seems pretty out of it right now."

"I should have called him when I heard." Jo glanced at her hands. "But we haven't really talked since the divorce. But that is history now."

"So why would you bring him up?"

"Matt and Steph have been on my mind a lot lately." Jo lifted the cup to her lips. A slight shudder shook her body. "Sorry, I never get used to this."

Ontario, 1985

Well, that's it then," Jo let the pen fall to the paper. "Five years together down the drain."

"It's for the best." Matt offered her a cup of coffee and picked up the paper trying to avoid the pained look on her face. "This allows us both to get on with our lives."

"Matt, I still..." Jo stopped as rage flared in Matt's eyes.

"Then you wouldn't have slept with him."

"I told you what happened. I thought you were sleeping with someone else. I thought you didn't love me anymore. He was there and it just happened."

"You're right about one thing," Matt turned so she wouldn't see the tears streaming down his face.

"I... don't... love... you..."

Matt jerked as she tried to place a hand on his shoulder. "Don't!"

Backing away, she closed the door behind her.

Turning back, she ran her finger along the number. "I still love you."

* * *

"I think Mr. Howard just became our prime suspect," Schanke grimaced taking another bit off a carrot stick. "How come you never gain any weight?"

"I've done a lot of exercise -- years of it." Nick stopped his caddy as the light turned red. "Many years."

"Yeah, well Myra has me on the scale every day before I go to work and every night after I get home," Schanke complained.

"Something doesn't add up," Nick waved at a passerby. "You didn't see his reaction."

"You're going to tell me about the criminal mind?" Schanke asked. "Trust your instincts. Mine tell me your buddy is dirty. He hated those two so they killed them."

"But why would he kill his brother and friend first?"

"He couldn't stand seeing them in pain." Schanke dusted off his hands. "Mr. Howard was the ultimate brother's keeper."

England, October 1815

"What are you going to do?" Nick growled.

"Come, come now. Just because you do something without my permission doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to destroy it." LaCroix absent-mindedly looked at his fingernails as if seeing a speck of dirt. "Whether you like it or not, I always enjoy you when bring another into our little family. It makes you more like us. Besides, I haven't even been properly introduced. She is very beautiful, no?" he added circling him closely, halting right behind him. "After all, she might be able to learn a few things from her... grandfather."

Nick snarled as his eyes turned gold. "You won't touch her." He attempted to grab LaCroix. But the white-haired man effortlessly floated up to the ceiling.

"You know you need to feed," he laughed. "I am only held by those who I want to hold me. Ahh... she returns."

"Nicholas, who is this?" she asked, entering the room from the window.

"No one." His eyes raged as he faced the white-haired vampire. "He was just leaving."

"LaCroix," he floated from his loft down to kiss her hand. "Are you Marie?"

Smiling serenely, she removed her hand from his grasp and chuckling slightly as if sharing a private joke.

"Sorry, I forgot -- I never taught you how to read minds. I guess I have been remiss in my training," he turned back to Marie. "How did you know to do that, fair lady?"

"I've always known," Marie glanced from Nick to LaCroix. "Now it is clearer than before. So how proud are you of your granddaughter?"

LaCroix smiled.

"Nicholas, stop worrying. I know what I am doing." She kissed LaCroix. "After all, he is right, there are many who need to die. There is also so much to learn."

Before he could reply, they disappeared.

Circa Today

"Look out!" Schanke yelled as Nick almost ran into another car. "Earth to Knight, Earth to Knight! Hey, get your head out of the clouds."

"Sorry, something's on my mind." He turned into the police station garage. "It doesn't add up. He wouldn't kill his brother after losing his parents."

"I'll run him for priors."

"No Schanke, you've been on for sixteen hours." Nick turned off the car. "Go home and spend some time with Myra."

He nodded and agreed. "Thanks Nick. Maybe she won't be too angry that I missed dinner again. Is that all-night flower shop still open?"

* * *

Captain Stonetree was upset. The press were referring to the current murder spree as "The AIDS Murders." The press was calling. The mayor was calling. Even his mother was calling.

"In my office," he growled as he saw Knight. "Now!"

Nick jumped slightly at the force behind Stonetree's yell. If there was anything Nick was ever afraid of, it was Stonetree when he was mad. Right now, "mad" was an understatement.

"We have a suspect." Nick quickly took the seat across the desk from the heavy-set man. "The brother of one of the murder victims has a motive and the means to carry it out."

"Then what's bothering you, Knight?" he asked.

"Something doesn't fit into place." He paused. "It's all too neat. He's being brought in for questioning now."

* * *

When Natalie heard about Matt's arrest, she was fuming. Immediately, she headed for Nick's apartment. She didn't care if it was in the middle of the day, she would be there when he woke up.

Opening the door, she was surprised to see Nick sitting on the couch staring at a half-filled bottle. Next to him was Janette. Neither were speaking.

"Don't you have a lock on your door?" Janette asked noticing Natalie. "You never know what might blow in."

"I have the key," she responded flatly. Nat didn't want to admit it, but Janette always made he feel uncomfortable. The woman was deadly, serene, and beautiful. They were similar in many ways. Both cared about Nick but neither wanted to admit it. "What is this about Matthew being arrested?"

Nick didn't say anything. He knew when Nat started her tirade, he had better just listen.

"He wouldn't kill his brother," Nat vented. "I never told you that before. He works to help people. It has been his life's work. He was in no shape to do anything when the last two were killed. Even if he blames himself for Steph's death, he couldn't do this. It isn't right."

"But his brother was going to die," Janette responded looking directly at Nick. "Sometimes it is easier to kill someone than to see them die."

"It wasn't him," Nick replied almost defensively. His eyes warned Janette to shut up, but he knew she was enjoying making him squirm.

"Good riddance though." She loftily reached for the bottle. "I never could stand the smell of their blood. There were a few who came into the Raven once, I thought I was going to be sick. Several of my... customers would have decided to go elsewhere if it wasn't for my fine service. I had to have the place fumigated and redecorated before they would come back."

Natalie paused, trying not to show her anger or disgust.

"I never understood why you drink this." Janette held the bottle to the light. "After all, the taste is terrible. All this to become Human? Nicholas, the price is too high. Do you want to have their diseases infect you?"

Janette almost retched at the thought. A vampire drinking HIV-positive blood? The idea made her sick. Unconsciously, she grabbed Nick's bottle and took two quick gulps. Realizing what she did, she grimaced and threw the bottle across the room.

Nick looked a little ill himself, nodding. "It could drive us crazy."

"But vampires can't be affected by Human diseases can they?"

"No, we can't get hepatitis or any blood-borne diseases, but the blood is also charged with their thoughts and experiences. 'Contaminated' blood tastes different. Some have been destroyed for drinking from the wrong person." Janette paused, remembering. "We'd rather see cures, too. After all, this disease only decreases the stock."

Natalie grimaced at the vampire's choice of words. Janette had spoken matter-of-factly. It didn't matter to Janette that Nat was one she could drink from. She sat down near Nick as her face drained.

"The Enforcers haven't had to exterminate any of us for that in a long time." Nick attempted to comfort her, but it wasn't working. "Nat, trust me, Janette's friends aren't responsible for this."

"Neither is Matt."

* * *

Matt Howard looked frail and worn as Schanke came to the door. He hadn't left his home in several days. The stench nearly knocked the policeman over.

"You have to come with me down to the station," Schanke put his hand to his face to cover the stench.

"Let me get my coat."

"You better clean up first." Schanke entered the living room as the man searched for his jacket. "You may be down there a while."

Matt agreed and headed for the bathroom. He left the door open and Schanke nodded. He was afraid he'd have to watch Matt so he wouldn't escape. Five minutes later, he knew he shouldn't have worried.

Matt rode in the car without saying anything.

"Do you know how to lose weight fast?" Schanke asked him as they traveled to the station. "My wife is determined to get me skinny. I've tried everything, but I can't get rid of this."

"Try dying," Matt tonelessly mumbled.

Neither said a word the rest of the way to the station.

* * *

"You're new here," Nurse Joanna Harrison greeted the new doctor. Joanna admired women who filled roles that were a few decades before considered "man jobs". "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for the isolation ward," the woman nodded to the nurse.

"Behind those doors," Harrison responded as she looked at the doctor -- she was a beautiful woman -- hair pulled back severely, little makeup and blue eyes hiding behind black-rimmed glasses. "Are you the new head of the department?"

"No," she paused, realizing she hadn't introduced herself. "Dr. E. M. Turret. And you are?"

"Nurse Joanna Harrison. But everyone calls me Jo," she accepted the physician's hand. "Are you on the night shift?"

"I prefer it," Eve paused. "There is more we can do to help ease their pain during the long night."

"I know what you mean," Jo agreed. "They are alone and need us now."

"Yes, they do."

* * *

"Nick get down here right away." Schanke munched on another carrot stick. "The good doctor has found something." As he hung up the phone, he glanced at Nat with pensive eyes. Natalie paced back and forth, glanced at her watch and at the folder containing her report. She looked frightened, something the detective wasn't used to. Natalie offered the detective a cup of tea while they waited.

"He shouldn't be too long." She rechecked her notes. "Captain, I have proof this wasn't committed by Matt. Or if it was, there is more to him than meets the eye."

Stonetree nodded looking at her. She was the perfect combination for Knight, he thought -- brains and beauty. If he were only twenty years younger... and not married, the chief scratched his chin.

"Evening Nat, Captain," Nick half-smiled at his partner. "What did you find out?"

"Just this," she handed the report to the captain. "The murder weapon has quite a history. Either it was used to carve up several different science projects or it has been involved in something else. See this," she handed the blade to Nick. "There are chips in it. Feel the handle Nick -- it's loose. The wood in the handle is worn. It should be in a museum rather than here." She paused as Stonetree stiffened. "I'll finish carbon dating the knife some time tomorrow. My best guess is it dates back more than two hundred years."

"Anything else Nat?" Nick asked.

"The murder... or murderers... are all left-handed judging by the angles of the incision," she said. "The person is also five foot-four to five foot-six."

"That's a short man with a big attitude," Schanke reScotted.

"Who's to say it's a man?" Nat crossed her arms.

"Thanks, Nat." Nick handed the knife back to her as he hustled Schanke out of the room before he could say anything more.

"Men," Nat icily glared at the door and then noticed Stonetree still sitting at his desk with an amused grin on his face.

* * *

Music caressed the air as Nick entered Janette's domain. The ancient beats pulsed as a base for the Raven. It was inviting, deadly, and erotic. In the middle of the dancing bodies sat Janette. She was sipping her wine and watching.

"Dug up any of our old friends lately?" Janette puffed on a cigarette as Nick stood next to her. "As busy as I am, I'd say there was a vampire convention in town."

"There is one I'm looking for... Marie..."

England, October 1815

"Why did you bring her here?" Janette frowned. "This is just another little girlfriend Nicholas couldn't do without."

"Come, come Janette," LaCroix airily responded. "Your fangs are showing. It is very unlady-like to play with your food."

"What are you two talking about?" Marie rubbed her eyes and looked at the other two. She wasn't quite used to never seeing the sun. The old habit of rubbing the slumber out of her eyes had carried over.

"Nothing, dear." Janette looked at her like she was an insignificant little bug. "We must be moving on."

"Now, Janette, I've never known you to give up a free meal," LaCroix reScotted. "After all, this is a hospital cafeteria."

Marie silently laughed at the joke and moved on. "I must go back to work," she straightened her uniform and tied her hair back. "So many deaths to take care of."

"She's so... English," Janette muttered sarcastically. "Yes, dear. Let me help."

The two women followed LaCroix into an operating room.

Savagely, Janette and LaCroix threw her on the table and held her down.

"Heal their pain," LaCroix mimicked Marie's words to Nick. "But you don't know it. Well... granddaughter... perhaps you should."

Janette playfully tossed him a barber's shaving blade. The instrument had been dipped in garlic.

Gleefully, LaCroix sliced through the woman's clothing and teased her skin with the point. "You think you're doing the Lord's work, don't you, my child?" He ran the blade over her face. "Saving their souls, silencing their screams. There is no salvation for you, girl. For you, there is only this." With an exaggerated arch, he sliced her throat. Blood seeped from the incision as she silently screamed.

"LaCroix, they're coming," Janette glanced toward the door.

"Yes, let them take her into the sun," he smirked as the woman lost consciousness. "After all, we wouldn't want to keep her from proper medical care. They still bleed people to cure them... don't they?"

Circa Today

Nick watched Janette light another cigarette after telling Nick about what LaCroix had done.

"I haven't seen her since then," she stated. "It was LaCroix's razor."

"I remember seeing it. He used to use it to savor their deaths -- at least when he wanted to."

"Why do you ask?"

"Natalie has a razor." Nick looked at the tabletop. "I haven't seen it since we were in White Chapel."

"Right before you left us." Janette glanced off as if remembering something. "He was very unhappy with you."

"Did she die?"

"Nicholas, you know there is more than one way to skin a bat."

"If you hear anything, let me know," he kissed her hand, glancing at her face, waiting for her to agree.

* * *

"Here are the rest of the records." Jo dropped the last set on the desk. "Are you going to get through all of these in one night?"

"Yes," Dr. Turret nodded. "I want to be familiar with the patient's histories. People sometimes make mistakes. I don't. I wouldn't want that noose hanging over my head."

"Have you heard anything about the murders?" Jo poured herself a cup of coffee. "The newspaper says there were two more."

Eve turned. "At least they won't have any more pain."

"What?"

"Is what we're doing really easing their pain? Sure we can give them 'wonder' drugs to prolong their life. We can offer them a smile and watch as they wither away. Money needs to be spent on curing them," Eve added bitterly. "AIDS is different. The blood. Their life fluid is dying. All we do is prolong that. Perhaps it is better for them to die."

"Old physicians bled their patients to cure them," she said flatly. "What would they think of all these lasers and miracles of modern medicine. Sometimes I don't know who was smarter -- those who bled them to death or us."

Jo turned white.

"Don't think I'm becoming another Dr. Kevorkian," Eve paused. "My job is to make them better, not worse. I'll get off my soap box now. C'mon, let's finish our rounds."

"Jo, Mr. Knight is in your office," another nurse interrupted the conversation. "I'll cover for you until you get back."

"Go ahead," Eve turned back to her work. "Remember, this is between us -- girl talk, you know."

* * *

"What can I do for you, Detective?" Jo asked as the color began to return to her face. She was scared. He sensed it.

"There were two more murders last night over at St. Mary's Hospital," Nick informed her. "I've asked the administrator if I can put guards on each of the floors. He told me to let you know we were doing this."

Jo nodded and smiled. "Thank you. I'll tell the rest of the staff."

He looked at her curiously. He could hear her heartbeat racing. "Something bothering you?"

"Just a conversation I had with one of the new doctors. Her approach to medicine is different than mine, that's all."

"Well, we are all creatures of habit," Nick smiled. "I must be going."

"Detective."

Nick turned around and looked.

"How did they die?"

"Razor blade, perfect incision, they bleed to death -- just like the others."

"Any clues?"

"We're working on it. Don't worry, you'll be safe."

* * *

"We need to get someone inside." Schanke glanced over the piling mound of paperwork hiding his desk. "Someone willing to play decoy."

"I'll do it," Matt turned and looked at the heavy-set detective.

"Do you know what you're saying?" Schanke glanced from Matt to Nick.

"Look, I have nothing to lose. My brother is gone... My friend is gone..." He paused. "I owe this to them. What do I have to do?"

"You three, in my office now!" Stonetree roared.

The three men looked at each other and then quickly entered.

"Now get this straight. Mr. Howard, you are not part of this investigation," he said barely containing his anger. "You're too personally involved. Besides not being on the force makes you a liability we can't afford. Imagine if the press got ahold of this. No. I won't allow it."

"Bullshit," Matt snarled. "Two of them men were family. I promised to help them. They didn't get to end it their way. It was taken from them. Now you want me to sit back and let someone else handle this? If I had been there, maybe they wouldn't be dead right now. I won't let this go unsolved. I will help, with or without you."

Stonetree shook his head. "We have police to do this. You're no longer a suspect, but we don't use civilians."

"Listen to me," Matt stepped closer to the man. "I've lost my brother. I've been accused of killing him and now you won't let me clear my name. What do I have to do to prove myself? Sit in my house and wait. I did that once. My parents died because of that. I sat back and my wife divorced me because of that. Steph died because I wasn't there. Now you're telling me I can't help? One way or another, I'm going to get that bastard. I can do it alone, but I'd rather do it the right way. I've spent my life helping others. Please, let me help myself."

Realizing he was within inches of Stonetree's face, he backed off and sat down. Nick and Schanke remained in their chair.

Mentally counting to ten... twice, Stonetree considered both options. The first could get this man killed. The other could, too. This way, at least the department would have a chance not to screw up the investigation. "All right," he said finally. "But you will wear a bug at all times. Schanke, you will watch him during the say. The night shift is yours, Knight."

Nick nodded.

"Don't screw this up, or you both will be permanently assigned to traffic duty."

The three left quickly.

"Mr. Howard, good luck."

He nodded and smiled. It was the first time he had done so since his brother's death.

* * *

The chart indicated Mr. Howard was being treated for mononucleosis. It was also noted on his chart he needed special treatment because he had the HIV virus. Jo closed her admission record and started crying. This couldn't be true. But the tests had proven it, she read the report three times. His T-cell count was also low. She knew now her ex-husband was dying.

"How did you get it?" she questioned him angrily as she burst into his room.

"Doing blood tests at the center," he flatly replied. He expected there would be more emotion, anger, pity, hatred. Instead, he felt nothing.

Quietly, she closed the door behind her. "Matt, don't do this to me. Not now. You can't have it... can you?"

"Say it, Jo," Matt clipped his words as he began shaking. "I have got AIDS. Just like Steph."

She started to respond but before she could do anything, Schanke rose and gently tugged her arm.

"Nurse, I'll thank you to keep your comments to yourself." Schanke took a step toward the door.

"She could cause some problems," Schanke retorted as he closed the door.

"Not any more," Matt turned his head away. "She won't be back."

* * *

Dr. Turret reviewed all the records. New patient. Matt Howard, mononucleosis, HIV positive, manic depressive.

She slowly read his name again. He would need special care. He was chosen.

"Doctor, I need you to take a look at this." Jo stuck out her hand entering her office.

The doctor looked at the cut. "What happened?"

"I did it drawing some blood, but I need to know... am I?"

"We won't know for two weeks." She quietly gave her a supporting glance. "Don't worry, everything will be all right."

The blood from the wound oozed as Eve wrapped it up. The doctor watched it stain the gauze. Jo began crying, not noticing that Eve's eyes had turned gold. The doctor heard the woman's heartbeat and the blood gushing through her veins.

Eve hugged Jo gently as the nurse tried to gain control of her emotions. "Slowly, she caressed the nurse's alabaster neck, her canines lowering... it was time to feed.

"Dr. Turret, we have a code blue in room 304," an intern shouted at the doctor as he burst in.

Eve quickly grabbed her stethoscope and left. "We'll discuss this later," she nodded to Jo as she left.

Jo's world was coming to an end. Now, the staff would know the secret she had so desperately hid. They would know she was HIV positive.

* * *

"So what you're saying is I need to exercise?" Schanke nodded as he talked to an intern who the officer had cornered in the hall. "Hey, I'm over fifty. You're supposed to be a little heavy when you get older, right?"

"Well, Mr. Schanke, there are several things that can happen if you aren't in shape. You have a better chance of getting a heart attack, hypertension, and several other diseases. In fact," she grinned. "Detective Knight asked us to make sure you weren't bringing in any doughnuts or other food you shouldn't be eating."

Schanke heard Matt chuckling in the background.

"Hey, you don't have to worry," Schanke retorted.

"Worry about what?" Nick asked, entering the room, trying to feign innocence.

"Schanke's wife thinks he's fat," Matt replied, barely containing his amusement.

"Naa, that's just a little extra baby fat," Nick patted Schanke's belly.

"Great, I'm in here with the gestapo GQ boys." Schanke sucked in his stomach. "I don't have to listen to this. I'm going to get some coffee. And Knight, you'll get yours."

"Myra made me promise," Nick stepped back and lifted his hands. "It wasn't my idea."

"Sorry Detective," the intern crossed her arms. "That'll have to be decaf. Cousin Myra told us you're getting too jittery and not sleeping at night."

"Doctors... they're all alike," Schanke pouted as he left the room.

"Who's that?" Nick asked, noting the woman doctor rushing by as Schanke left.

"That's Dr. Eve Turret, one of the newest doctors in the clinic," she noted, checking Matt's chart.

"She has an empathy with the patients that many of the others don't have."

"Seems like she knows her business." Matt glanced down the hall.

"Well, are you ready for another night?"

"Sure," Matt nodded. "Well, I'm going to sleep. Wake me if anything happens."

"You're the boss."

Schanke walked in with a pot of coffee.

"Here, Knight," he put the tray down. "You might need this. The shift is a little boring and there is nothing on the tube except a Lugosi film festival. I'm going back to the station before going home. See you in the morning."

"Night." Nick grabbed the remote and began flipping through the channels. "I want to drink your blood," he snickered, imitating the "King of the Vampires."

"Not another all-niter," Matt groaned, pulling the pillow over his head. "No wonder I look terrible; I never get any sleep."

"Part of the disguise," Nick retorted.

"Everyone's a comedian." Matt just shook his head and tried to get some much-needed sleep.

* * *

"There was nothing I could do," Turret wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. "The damage was too much. He didn't have a chance."

"You did the best you could," the nurse paused as the doctor covered the body. "He's been in and out of here for two years with AIDS-related complications. He knew it was just a matter of time." The nurse tried to hold back her tears. "He is... was... a good friend."

"But that doesn't matter to him now," Eve interrupted, barely controlling her rage. "I won't let this happen again!"

* * *

"I hate this place," Janette growled, entering Matt's hospital room. "But, you wanted to show me something important. After all, there is nothing I wouldn't do for you, Nicholas."

"Check this out," Nick turned the television back on.

"Ah... Bella," Janette relaxed and took off her black-laced gloves. "You know how I like the old movies."

"Popcorn anyone?" Matt rolled over. "Nick, I told you not to bring your dates to the hospital -- very bad form."

"Sleep." Janette purred. "Sleep."

"Yes... sleep..." Matt agreed as he dozed off.

* * *

"Doctor, what are you doing?" Jo asked as Eve raced down the hallway.

"Stay back," Eve ordered as she glared at the nurse. "Their pain must be stopped!"

"That's what we're here to do." Jo bravely stood her ground. "Want to talk about it?"

"No. There is someone... something here..." Eve turned, sensing a presence... someone who had laughed at her, tried to kill her. She would find them.

Jo watched the woman race into the ward, in her hand clutching a razor blade. Jo's face lost its color as she noticed where the angry woman was going. The room she entered was Matt's.

* * *

"You!" Dr. Turret exploded, seeing Janette and Nick. The memories of the past washed over her. "You tried to kill me."

"Marie," Nick turned to the woman he had lost so many years ago.

"I'll kill you," she lunged at Janette, swinging her new razor.

"Are you ready to dance?" Janette easily dodged the thrust. "Nicholas, stay out of this."

"You tried to kill me," Marie rolled the razor in her palm. "You were supposed to teach me. I had to teach myself."

"You should have died," Janette snarled. "The blood has changed you. You are not sane."

"Sane? Killing healthy people rather than those who are going to die sane? No, sweet lady, you are the one who is insane."

"LaCroix was right. You should have been eradicated," Janette reached for her. "Now, I will finish the job." Sinking her teeth into Marie's shoulder. Janette tasted the vampire's blood and immediately began retching.

"That's right," Marie laughed as Janette dropped to the floor. "I have been tainted. But I will save them." She then jumped out the window and disappeared.

As Nick went after her, he could hear Janette screaming for him. "I'm dying," she gasped as her strength left her body. "Give me your blood."

Nick ripped his shirt open and pressed Janette to his jugular. As she clamped onto his throat, he completed the circle. Their heartbeats merged as blood flowed between them. Their thoughts, bodies and beings united.

The questions burning in Nick's mind were answered. *Janette and LaCroix's attempted murder... Marie... too dangerous for the living or the dead... LaCroix's razor... White Chapel... plague... polio... AIDs... Steph... avenging angel... death... a heart beat... LaCroix... a pulse... Janette... life...*

"You should have told me," Nick bitterly looked away from her.

"It wouldn't have changed anything," Janette weakly turned his face toward hers. "She should have been destroyed. How many have paid the price?"

* * *

"They will pay," Marie growled angrily. "They are diseased."

She loosened her hair, and the "Turret" personae disintegrated. She had heard about the Raven.

"That's where I will destroy them... in her place of power."

Noticing a young man driving a red Porsche, she dropped down to the curb and began walking. Smiled, she waved as he pulled to the corner. He never knew what hit him.

* * *

"It's for you," Nick handed the phone to Janette. "It's your bartender."

"Yes... Make sure she stays there." Hanging up the phone, she shot Nick a worried look. "She's at the Raven."

"Tell them to clear out all the Humans," Nick ordered. "I don't want them involved."

"Always the gentleman," she smiled.

"What are you two..." Matt asked finally.

"You will remember nothing," the two vampires' eyes bore into his controlling his thoughts.

* * *

She had been told to wait. Behind his direction was something making her stay. Controlling her urge to attack, she tensed up... like a snake about to strike.

The music pulse slightly eased her anger. No one was ill or in pain. It was almost bliss. The people danced with wild abandon. They were like her. This wasn't only owned by a vampire; it was home to the creatures of the night.

"It's about time you got here," Marie stated without turning around. She glanced in the mirror behind the bar. Others had cleared away, leaving an open path from them to her... or her to them. "It has been a long time."

"Marie, why didn't you come back to me?" Nick asked as old emotions stirred -- hate, love, and hurt. "You knew I was there for you."

"Were you?" she spun and faced them. "After your father and this bitch finished with me, I was left to die. They put me in a room with no windows. They claimed I was insane." She paused to smile at the irony, looking at Janette. "They tried to cure me."

"You shouldn't have been created," Janette growled. "A vampire like you has no place in the world. You were sloppy. You raised suspicion. We didn't have a choice."

"There always was a choice," she glared at Nick, "But you made me. You... the one who saw the beauty of the skin and the heart. Well, my heart is no longer beautiful. Do you plan to cure me now? You, the king who would be a man and you, the lady in waiting -- LaCroix's lackeys."

Dashing for the door, she was stopped as party-goers walked in. Grabbing one, she ripped his neck and sampled the life nectar. Dropping the body like a rotten garbage bag, she headed out the door.

"Stay behind," Nick ordered Janette as he raced after her. "And get him out of here."

Panic edged into his mind as he chased after her. The sun was beginning to rise.

* * *

Jo watched as they carried out the bodies into the hospital morgue. Eve killed three people... friends," she amended. She walked into a room where Matt was sleeping.

"How are you doing? She's right, you know. There is nothing we can do. But then again, maybe there is." Pausing, she looked at the blade Eve had dropped. "We should have stayed together... tried harder. We could have made it work." The razor was dull and bloody.

"Now, we both have been condemned." She ran her finger over his lips as tears streamed down her face. "After all my love, this we can do together."

Gently she kissed the one man she had ever loved.

* * *

"There's no where you can run." Nick landed next to her. "You know this isn't right."

"Perhaps you're right, Nicholas," she responded coldly. Her eyes clouded as she gazed at her former lover. "Their voices cry out to me. Their blood rushes with the pain. All I wanted to do was to end their pain... and yours."

"My pain?" he asked.

"I have known for a long time how you hate what we are," she gently hugged him. "I want to make your pain go away, too."

"It... it isn't that easy." Nick returned the embrace and slowly separated from her. "If anyone should know, I thought it would be you."

"Then why did you let them try to kill me? You... the only one who stood by me when everyone else ignored me," she shouted with machine-gun fire. "I trusted you. I needed you. You were my life line."

"No..." Nick turned to avoid her words. "I won't listen to this. You murdered those people."

"They were dead already. Or hadn't you noticed?" her voice teased him. "I did what you couldn't do. You couldn't let me die because you loved me. I killed them because there was nothing left except death."

Turning, she looked at the cars on the street below. Orange and yellow streaks silently seared the night's blackness.

"Which is easier? To let them die in pain? To watch their bodies age and fall apart?" Tears washed her cheeks. "I was a nurse. I swore to make their lives easier. It is who I am. Isn't that what I have done for so many. I was your sliver of humanity... bound to you... you needed to help me to ease your own conscious."

Nick senses Janette and a few bar patrons' presence as they landed behind him. He could sense a mob-like anger brewing.

"Now, I am the one who's time has come." She eyes Janette with pure hatred. "They... she will protect you from yourself. It is your greatest fault, my love."

"Come Nicholas," Janette tugged at Nick's shoulders. "You don't need to be a part of this."

Easing away from her, he removed his trenchcoat and wrapped Marie tenderly in its velvet warmth. Reaching behind him as he kissed the woman, he grabbed wooden stake from Janette's lace-covered hands.

As the bond between the two of them intensified, he felt the sun's warmth on his body. "Farewell, Marie."

Thrusting forward, he lodged the stake into her heart.

As pain flooded through her, she looked to him tenderly. "Nicholas, I love you," she whispered. "Thank you."

As his strength weakened, he leapt through the door and into welcoming darkness.

Turning back once more, he numbly watched he body burst into flame.

* * *

"They got her," Schanke reported as Nick hung his coat on the back of his chair. "Seems the good Nurse Harrison was HIV positive, too."

"What about the razor we have?"

"Her family collected medical antiques," Schanke replied. "We found her in the room with her last victim, Matt Howard."

"Her ex-husband?" Nick bitterly asked. "Perhaps she still lived him and didn't want to watch him go through it alone. Nat told me how much they loved each other." Nick's eyes focussed on a coffee stain on his desk blotter.

"By the way, where were you when she killed him?" Schanke asked.

"I was chasing another suspect," Nick paused. "It was a dead end."

"Well partner, it just goes to show, there is a lot I need to teach you," Schanke leaned back. "You have got to learn to trust me."

"In my office, now!" Stonetree shouted.

Glancing at Nick, Schanke shuddered and didn't say anything.

"Internal affairs is on my back about your performance on the Harrison case," the captain began without waiting for the door to be closed. "They demanded I put you both on suspension for your actions."

"Captain, I can't afford..." Schanke stammered.

"I know, I told them you were after an accomplice. IA has decided to keep you on the payroll but only under the following conditions." He paused trying to find the right words. "You can either be reassigned or resign."

"Reassignment? Captain, I've worked here all my life," Schanke dropped into the chair.

"I've overlooked things in the past, but IA thinks because of you two, he was killed." Stonetree paused, looking at the file in front of him. "There was a guard on the floor and that is the only reason you two still have your jobs."

"You're going to a good precinct." He tried to sound cheerful. "There is no other way. The paperwork will take a few weeks to go through. I suggest you take a vacation."

"Captain?"

"It's either that or walk out of here without your badges," their commander said a little louder than he had wanted to.

"Goodbye, Captain," Schanke rose in zombie-like fashion and left.

"Knight?"

The detective turned to face his former commander.

"Take care of him."

* * *

"She said she was going to stop my pain." Nick handed Janette a goblet. It was a special bottle Janette had insisted upon bringing when Nick invited her over to his place. "I wonder."

"Nicholas, listen to me," Janette commanded. "I can't understand your wanting to be Human. But to live with all these diseases? It would be like wanting to kill yourself."

"Who's talking about killing themselves?" Nat plopped down on the couch. "Are you being a bad influence?"

"*Pas de toute*," Janette smiled. "Just watching the movie."

"Do you have any popcorn?" Nat sat down in a chair and tried to make herself comfortable. "What's playing?"

"What else?" Nick smiled as he looked at Janette and winked.

"Dracula," they both responded as they let their fangs down.

Nat jumped up onto the chair and screamed.

"What, is there a mouse in the room?" Janette asked.

"No..." Natalie grinned. "Just a couple of rats."

Nick chuckled silently. "The movie's about to begin."

On the television, a famous talk show host was talking about teen-aged sexual practices.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Nat feigned illness.

"But I have the cure," Janette smiled, picking up the remote and turning the channel.

FROZEN TEARS

by Maddog

And I touched your face
only for a moment

The warmth of your skin
igniting my cold, dead heart

So soft, you are so soft
my fingers trail down your neck

Do they feel like frozen tears
or do they seem dead and numb

Wish that they were numb, Natalie
then I could not feel your pulse

Your very life under them
stirring desires I dare not acknowledge

You put your hand on mine
to hold it for a heart beat longer

Your warmth making me feel alive
making me a mortal man again

Only for a moment
when I touched your face

THE CHOSEN FEW

by Barbara Parker

Nick awakened with a start, instinctively knowing that someone was in his apartment. Slipping out of bed, he cautiously made his way downstairs.

Janette was standing at the foot of the stairs, wine bottle in hand. There was a slight smirk on her face as she looked at Nick who was wearing nothing but a pair of silk boxer shorts. "Dressed for success, I see."

Nick groaned then went to get dressed. When he returned to the living room, Janette was seated comfortably on the sofa, drink in hand. She filled a glass for Nick, then gave it to him, watching as he took a long sip.

Nick's eyes opened wide as the taste hit him. There was human blood mixed in with the usual animal. He wanted to spit it out but couldn't. The Beast within overrode the impulse. Nick closed his eyes while he swallowed, angry with himself for giving in to his dark side while, at the same time, savoring the tastes and sensations unique to the blood of mortals. Although he would never admit it, he was sorry to feel the "high" begin to fade.

Janette was not affected by Nick's accusing look. "Don't be so self-righteous with me, Nicholas; I haven't done anything immoral. My supplier came by it honestly. Remember that brouhaha over the mislabeled blood recently?"

A vague recollection filtered through Nick's mind of a botch-up at the blood bank. It had been a hectic few weeks with the baseball play-offs in town and then a convention, so he'd forgotten the whole affair. Janette offered him the bottle again. As much as the Beast wanted the mortal blood, Nick refused. He rose from the sofa and walked around the room until the craving lessened.

Janette shrugged her thin shoulders. "I was hoping that you would have stopped by the club yesterday because I wanted to know if you received one of these." She produced a heavy vellum envelope from the pocket of the jacket beside her.

Nick stopped his pacing and nodded. "I found mine inside the refrigerator when I woke up Tuesday night."

"I found mine in an unusual place as well," Janette said. There was a hint of unease in her eyes. "Who do you think delivered them?"

Nick had been wondering that very same detail for the past two days. Obviously it had to be another vampire -- one who was familiar with their individual security measures and one who could so completely mask his presence that neither of them was awakened by the psychic "early warning system" that alerted them to unseen dangers. After a long while, Nick finally answered Janette's question: "I don't think we want to know."

Clearly agitated, Janette took a drink directly from the bottle of blood. "I don't like it, Nicholas. I will not go."

Nick sat down again and covered Janette's hand with his. "I don't think we have much of a choice."

After taking Janette back to the *Raven*, Nick headed for the station, stopping at Natalie's office first to get the results of an autopsy report.

"Talk about timing," Natalie said as she put down the telephone receiver. "I was just calling to give you the information on Denton."

Nick took a seat on the edge of Nat's desk. "Shoot."

Natalie winced and Nick apologized for the unintentional pun. "Denton's wound was self-inflicted as we suspected, but it's my guess that he committed suicide after paying a visit to his doctor. You said that McGill was stalling because Denton hadn't yet died."

Nick nodded.

"Well, during the autopsy, I found a malignant meningioma tumor on the right side of his brain. From the location and extent of involvement, I'd say it was inoperable."

"His death was inevitable then."

"My guess is six to eight weeks." Nat studied Nick for a few moments. "I know you feel sorry for Denton's family, but it really isn't like you to take it so hard. Does this dredge up something from your past?"

"Not really. I've had something on my mind, that's all." Nick extracted the invitation he had received and gave it to the medical examiner.

Natalie inspected it. The paper was of the finest quality which she imagined only royalty and the ultra-rich had access to, and the raised script was exquisite. "Must be pretty swanky with an invitation like this."

"It's hardly an invitation," Nick pointed out.

Natalie re-read the note:

Your presence is cordially required at the Chateau Mirabeaux on 4 November precisely one hour after sunset. (Meals provided. Sleeping accommodations available.)

"Cordially required? That's a new one." Natalie gave the invitation back to Nick. "So, what's this little get-together about?"

"That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question," Nick answered dryly. "All I know is that LaCroix and Janette stayed there for a time at the close of the last century. I know nothing of its recent history and apparently, neither does Janette." He noticed Nat bristle at the mention of the female vampire.

"So, Janette has been 'invited', too?"

"Yes. The only other in the area to receive one of those is John Gray. He was brought across in 1473, so apparently he is the oldest who have been summoned."

Nick slipped into a troubled silence, and Natalie tried to lighten the mood. "Doctors have conventions all the time, so why not vampires?"

Nick was not amused.

* * * * *

"Paris is as beautiful as ever," Janette remarked as the taxi she and Nick took from the airport entered the city of her youth. "Shall we walk the rest of the way?"

Nick shrugged, not caring one way or the other. Janette told the cabbie to stop, paid the fare plus a sizable tip and told the man to deliver their luggage to the Hotel Crillon.

Nick remained sullen as they took their little tour. He mumbled politely as Janette reminisced about the familiar places they paced and lamented those that hadn't survived the years. On the Champs-Elysees, Janette groaned at the sight of Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe. It was draped with netting to hold in crumbling pieces of masonry.

"Heads will roll if Bonaparte knew how they neglected this."

"I doubt that. He only built the thing to appease you."

Janette stuck her nose in the air. "It was a fitting tribute. He deserved it. Besides, I didn't goad him into erecting the arc. I merely suggested it."

Nick smirked, "Just like LaCroix 'suggested' the Russian Campaign. We all know how well that turned out."

Janette could offer no rebuttal.

The vampires brought their tour to a close by walking through the Tuileries Gardens then down the Rue de Rivoli to the Hotel Crillon.

Nicholas held a silent but controlling interest in the hotel but hadn't been there in nearly a century, not since he killed the ballerina who had captured his dark heart. Of course, LaCroix had had a hand in destroying her as he had in destroying everything Nick cared for.

Nick voiced his thoughts as he watched the sky over the National Assembly Building on the far side of the Seine for signs of the dawn's first faint rays. "I always come back to him, doesn't it?"

Janette sighed and began to close the heavy draperies. "I suppose it does, Nicholas. After all, we shall forever be LaCroix's children. There's simply no changing that fact."

* * * * *

Janette stared out the tinted windows of the chauffeur-driven limousine at the passing countryside and thought. She had an idea of what this "meeting" concerned, but she was by no means certain. In fact, she hoped that her assumptions were far from the truth. She glanced over at Nick and wondered if the same thoughts were going through his mind. She couldn't pick up anything. He had been completely detached since they left Paris.

The chauffeur turned off the main highway onto a private, tree-lined road. About a mile down the road, he pulled up to the gates of a magnificent, turreted mansion behind a dozen other vehicles. Janette got out of the limo, smoothed the front of her sleek silk dress, and put her arm through Nick's once he exited the car. Slowly they made their way towards the sizable crowd milling near the entrance. They mumbled greetings and listened to the speculation as to who and what were responsible for bringing them together. There was a multitude of theories.

Nick patted Janette's hand. She was edgy -- too edgy. It was as if she knew what was going on but was afraid to say it. She seemed to relax slightly when they, at last, entered the huge foyer of the chateau. Nick knew that this was one of the few places she had lived in over the centuries that she regretted leaving behind. He couldn't blame her. It was the grandest place he'd ever seen. The floor was of highly polished black marble, and the white-paneled walls were trimmed in gold -- real gold -- while on either side of the entrance hall were two enormous reception rooms whose arched doors slid back into the walls to create one cavernous area.

Nick looked around at his fellow "guests". Counting the ones still outside, he estimated the number of vampires to be somewhere around three hundred. Many of the faces were vaguely familiar, and it bothered Nick that he couldn't make the connection between their familiarity and the reason that they had been summoned here.

The stragglers from outside entered after a bell sounded from somewhere deep within the house. They brought with them the unmistakable scent of freshly spilled human blood. Nick looked over his shoulder. Most of the "diners" still had the bloodlust in their eyes, and as he turned back, Nick saw Janette unconsciously run her tongue across her lips. He felt his own Beast try to assert itself. He closed his eyes briefly while he forced it into submission. When he opened his eyes, he was startled to see two of the Enforcers slowly descend the wide, curving staircase at the far end of the hall.

A chill raced up Nick's spine for it seemed that they were looking directly at him. What had he done now? Janette sucked in her breath, and Nick knew that he wasn't imagining it. They were looking for him. The vampires in front began to inch away as if his proximity might somehow bring the Enforcers' wrath upon them. Janette reached for Nick's hand and held it tightly.

Nick's attention was drawn again to the top of the stairs, and he was startled a second time when he saw young David, the British orphan LaCroix brought across during the Second World War. Of its own accord, Nick's thoughts drifted back in time. It had been pleasurable for him and Janette to dote on the war orphan and play at being parents, but like so many other things, LaCroix ruined it all by corrupting the innocent child.

Nick was brought out of his reverie as an unspoken surge of excitement passed through the crowd. He looked towards Janette who gasped and tightened her grip on his hand. "*Mon Dieu,*" she muttered.

Nick followed her gaze to the top of the marble stairs. His own eyes opened wide at the incredible sight before him. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. It couldn't.

The assembled vampires stared silently as two of their own came down the broad steps. While they didn't recognize the woman, they did recognize the man, disfigured though he was by severe burns. He stood erect though obviously using his gold-handled walking stick as much for support as ornamentation. They quietly murmured as their vampire father reached the bottom of the stairs, then fell silent once more as he looked them over with those extraordinary ice-blue eyes.

The two Enforcers came forward, seizing Nick and propelled him toward the bottom of the staircase. The boy vampire, Daniel, took hold of Janette's arm and led her forward as well.

Impossible! Nick's mind screamed as he watched the two vampires at the foot of the stairs. Although he was face to face with them, Nick couldn't believe his eyes.

"Surprise, surprise, surprise," said Alyce Hunter. Both the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes oozed malevolence.

"Long time, no see, eh, Nicholas?" her companion added.

Nick stared mutely at LaCroix. If not for those eyes, he would not have known who was speaking to him for they were the only recognizable features apart from the close-cropped platinum hair.

Part of the exposed skin on LaCroix's face and hands was covered with a reddish brown, scabrous crust while the parts of skin that were more advanced in the healing stages were reddish and somewhat shiny as if the skin had only just replenished itself.

"Don't embarrass yourself by denying the obvious, Nicholas. And do stop thinking that this is impossible, that you saw me die in Toronto." LaCroix paused as one would while trying to explain a complicated matter to a child. "Think back, Nicholas, and truly remember."

"I do remember. I impaled you and watched you burn--"

"Correction -- you saw me catch fire but you fainted before I was completely consumed. You let yourself become as weak as a mortal by not feeding. However," LaCroix began as he took a few painful steps towards Janette. He reached out with his burnt right hand and caressed her cheek. She closed her eyes as the dry, cracked skin touched her. "However, my darling Janette pulled me to safety mere seconds before your mortal friends arrived." He fixed his eyes upon Nick again.

Nick shot a look of betrayal towards Janette. She answered him silently, *I had to, Nicholas. Don't you see?* Disgusted, Nick turned away. When LaCroix reached out to touch him, he backed away as far as the Enforcers, still holding him, would allow.

LaCroix withdrew his hand while his briefly benevolent expression turned fierce. "You have been like a son to me, Nicholas -- a willful, disobedient, stubborn child determined to escape from the heritage of your family." He waved his hand, indicating his other "children" and their "offspring". "I have overlooked your onerous behavior and tried to get you to conform, but now..." He paused as the Enforcers grew restless and began to bare their fangs, uttering low, growling sounds. Nick winced.

LaCroix continued. "But now, Nicholas, even I have had enough of this longing-to-be-a-mortal nonsense of yours, and I simply don't want to protect you from yourself any longer." He stopped, and Alyce spoke for him.

She moved to stand on the bottom step so that she could look down on Nick as she did. "Even a vampire as new as I am knows to follow the Code, but apparently you never gave it much respect." She paused while the Enforcers snarled again. "Not only have you revealed the secret of our existence to far too many mortals, you have committed the most unforgivable offense of all." She pointed a finger at Nick. "You tried to willfully murder another vampire -- your maker, no less!"

The Enforcers recommenced with their snarls while those in the crows who were unaware of the party responsible for LaCroix's "demise" made their dissatisfaction known as well.

Nick looked towards Janette for support. She had her arms around Daniel and was staring down at the gray veining of the marble floor despite Nick's psychic calling. It gave him no comfort to see that ignoring him was difficult for her. She was biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Daniel kindly wiped it away from her chin then licked his finger while smirking at Nick.

"At least I am my father's son."

The Enforcers quieted, and LaCroix tapped his walking stick on the floor to get the attention of the others. "Although the customary penalty for your crimes is death, the Enforcers have been... understanding enough to let me give you a choice between their punishment and one of my own choosing."

The Enforcer on Nick's left, the shorter of the two, growled and produced a large, wooden stake from the folds of his coat.

LaCroix spoke again. "As I said, I have my own ideas for your punishment." He inclined his head to the right, and all eyes turned towards the doorway of the reception room.

Nick cried out and tried to run at the sight of a bound and gagged Natalie being pulled into the foyer by a third Enforcer, but he was held fast by the vampires who flanked him. Although their fingers barely seemed to tense, Nick felt that his bones would be crushed if the Enforcers increased their grip even a fraction. Despite the pain, he leaned forward as Natalie was brought to stand before him. She was placed between Alyce and LaCroix with Alyce taking over from the Enforcer who originally held Natalie.

The pathologist grimaced at the pain Alyce's grasp caused her. She was trembling violently, and tears formed in her eyes when the blindfold was removed, and she saw LaCroix caress her hair and throat with his scabrous hand.

Nick topped struggling when he realized that he wouldn't do himself or Nat any good crippled. Although broken bones would heal quickly, precious time would be wasted. And precious little time was all he had.

He knew that LaCroix didn't want him dead -- that would be too simple, too final for his "father". No, LaCroix would want to see him tormented beyond compare at the sight of Natalie's suffering. He also knew that the Enforcers wouldn't let LaCroix run the show forever, and he had to be strong enough to take his chance when it came. He tried to lock onto Natalie's frightened eyes.

The crust of LaCroix's cheeks cracked and oozed a thick, colorless liquid as he smirked, "In reparation for your attempt on my life, I want the life of the fair Ms. Lambert who has so selfishly been trying to return you to the mortal world. I demanded that you take her, Nicholas. I want you to drink her dry."

"Never, LaCroix."

"Never, Nicky?" Alyce teased. "I doubt that. You see, if you don't do the deed, then we're giving her to them." She indicated the Enforcers who were fairly drooling as they, one after the other, leered at Natalie with anticipation. "They will take her while you and the rest of us watch, and then when that's over, it's the stake for you."

"I won't do it, LaCroix," Nick sneered.

LaCroix fixed those ice-blue eyes of his upon Nick. "I think you will, Nicholas. You may have convinced yourself and your little mortal love that you have tired of being a vampire, but you can't fool me. You didn't survive eight centuries just to find a cure. You survived because you wanted to. The Beast is alive within you, Nicholas, and the time has come to set it free and have you rejoin your true family."

Natalie and Nick were dragged upstairs and shoved into an elegantly appointed bedroom. Alyce laughed as Natalie fell backwards over a low Louis XV table. Nick ran to Nat and began untying her bonds. He stole a glance at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"I think not, Nicholas. Guards have been posted at every conceivable vantage point. If you try to escape, you'll both end up dead." He smirked as Natalie began to sob. "It's just before midnight. You have until dawn to carry out your sentence or face the wrath of the Enforcers." With that, LaCroix and his entourage withdrew.

Nick helped Natalie over to the brocade settee. He sat beside her and held her while she cried. Soon, the Limoges clock on the mantle chimed midnight. When her tears were spent, Natalie continued to cling to Nick as she told him how the Enforcers kidnapped her from her apartment.

"They flew me across the ocean. That was bad enough, but they -- they made a game out of it." She drew away from Nick just enough to look at him. "They would let me go and let me fall towards the sea, then they would zoom down and grab me just before I would hit the water." She shuddered at the thought of the experience. "Can you get me out of here?"

"I don't see how," Nick answered quietly. He held Nat close once again and stroked her hair while he thought of what LaCroix had said. Had he endured for so long because he wanted to be immortal? No, LaCroix was only tormenting him as always, planting doubts where none should exist. He had come to hate this existence and the evil it represented.

Really?

Nick was taken aback by the small, persistent inner voice. He tried to silence it but found out he couldn't. *Is this quest of yours for a "cure" what makes you go on? You've seen mortals succumb to every sickness, accident, and acts of cruelty imaginable. Is that what you want -- to live each minute with the knowledge that you may die at any moment?*

Nick was certain that he wouldn't do that. It would be ridiculous to be so paranoid. Other mortals didn't dwell on possible misfortunes and neither would he. It was ridiculous.

The inner voice would not be silenced. *Really? Could you turn a blind eye to the inevitable the way that they do, knowing what you know, seeing what you've seen?*

Nick's thought were silent. He couldn't supply any answers. He looked down at Natalie who had fallen into an exhausted sleep. As gently as he could, Nick picked her up and carried her to the canopied

bed in the far corner of the room and laid her down. The porcelain clock signaled the passing of another hour. The time was moving too quickly. There were only a few hours until dawn when he'd have to kill Natalie himself or watch her be savaged by the Enforcers.

He walked over to the window and tried the handle, finding that it was unlocked. Hewent out onto the small balcony, ignoring the menacing snarls of the guard vampire on the balcony below. Nick gazed up at the star-filled sky and wished that it didn't have to end this way. If only there were some higher power he could appeal to for Natalie's life. If only the tales of the Chosen Few were true.

Nick managed a small, bitter smile before going back inside. The Chose Few -- the handful of original vampires who came from some other world. They were rumored to possess invincible powers, including the unthinkable ability to withstand exposure to the sun. The oldest Enforcers claimed to be the direct progeny of the Chosen Few which accounted for their strength and authority. Nick suspected that this was speculation and nothing more. The Enforcers were strong because of the amount of blood they consumed, especially the blood of vampires who broke the Code.

Really, Nicholas?

Nick frowned at the return of the inner voice. He plopped down in one of the thickly cushioned chairs near the mantle, ran his hand through his hair, and closed his eyes. Surely this was some trick on LaCroix's or Alyce's part. These nagging doubts were too much and the tone was different than his own. "Leave me be, LaCroix," he mumbled. "You know what the outcome will be. I have no other choice."

Nick took a deep breath and clenched his teeth as he felt the Beast within him begin to stir. He opened his eyes and looked over at Natalie. He moved from the chair to the bed and stared at her. How beautiful she was. The Beast began to assert itself, causing Nick to reach out and touch her. He stroked her silky hair then let his fingers trail along the side of her face. She was so soft, so alive. She stirred and, in doing so, turned slightly to one side, exposing her neck. Nick lazily brushed his fingertips back and forth, feeling her rich, mortal blood pulse beneath her smooth, fair skin.

The Beast was fully aroused and much to his dismay, Nick found that he didn't want to subdue it. The choice had been made for him; the least he could do for Nat was to make it as swift and painless as possible. He kissed her neck then pulled back as his canines extended. He began to lower his head when Natalie awakened. Startled, Nick pulled back and turned away, ashamed.

Natalie sat up, grabbing Nick's arm. Although she was frightened by the evil look that had been on his face, she tried not to let it show when he turned to look at her. It tookher a moment to find her voice for her mouth felt as though it was stuffed with cotton balls. "I know that LaCroix wants you to... to kill me, but would I stay dead? You told me that Dr. Hunter..." She guessed the answer from the tortured expression on Nick's face, but she needed to hear it. In the background, the Limoges clock chimed three times.

Nick glanced at the clock then turned back to Natalie, taking her hands in his. He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye so he stared down as he rubbed his thumbs over the backs of her trembling hands. "I don't want to make you a vampire, Nat, and I don't think you want that either." He paused, glanced up, then lowered his eyes again. "If I did bring you across..." He looked up again and felt his heart break as tears welled up in Natalie's eyes. He hugged her. "I'm so sorry. I wish that I had never entered your life."

Natalie never had the chance to reply. Nick suddenly thrust her from his embrace, then stood. She pulled herself back up to a sitting position and watched in disbelief as a mask of fear quickly covered Nick's handsome face. Unconsciously, her eyes moved from Nick to the space behind him where an opaque mist was beginning to seep in beneath the French windows.

Nick was oblivious as it floated upwards in a swirling column behind him. Natalie watched, slack-jawed, as the mist solidified and slowly took the form of a woman -- or rather a series of women -- tall, thin, petite, stout, young, and old. If questioned, Natalie would have sworn that she caught a glimpse of Myra Schanke before the "thing" settled on its final shape -- a tall, red-haired woman in her mid-twenties, dressed in a long, shapeless white gown which seemed to reflect the colors of the rainbow like silver holographic paper. The gown was sleeveless and was held in place at the shoulders by a wide, Egyptian-like collar of thin, polished gold. The woman's most striking feature was her eyes -- large, deep-set, and an odd, luminous greenish-yellow. Natalie wanted to warn Nick that the woman was behind him, but all she could do was lay down. She suddenly felt so... very... tired...

Nick remained transfixed, unable to go to Natalie's side until the silent command was given. He could only get to within two feet of the bed before an invisible field of some sort stopped him from going any further.

The Lambert woman is safe for now.

Nick swayed slightly. The voice in his head would have been deafening if spoken aloud. He felt as if he had his ear up against an amplifier at a rock concert. The voice came again, softer and more normal this time.

Forgive me. I am not used to communicating from so short a distance.

Nick turned ever so slowly as a few bars of Disney's "When You Wish Upon a Star" played in his mind.

The corners of the red-haired vampire's mouth curved upward. The time, she spoke as any mortal would, her voice being husky and just a bit familiar. "I really shouldn't get you out of this mess you've created for yourself. In fact, the Code should have been enforced upon you long ago, however..." She shrugged, unable to put into words her reason for protecting Nick from a distance for so long. She stepped forward and caressed the side of his face with her index finger.

The vampire's touch nearly knocked Nick over. The woman quickly withdrew her hand while Nick continued to stare in amazement at her. Never in his eight centuries had he felt such incredible power emanate from another vampire. Even the brute strength of the Enforcers was nothing compared to this, and she hadn't even been trying to harm him. Questions which hadn't even formed themselves complete in his mind were answered silently.

I am one of the Few, chosen to leave our dying world. We created the glory that was Atlantis until greed and selfishness destroyed that as well. The red-haired vampire looked at Natalie then turned back towards Nick. "Do you want to take her, make her one of us? I can assure your safety from the others for all time."

Nick hesitated in answering. If LaCroix and the Enforcers weren't a problem, would Nat want to share his life? He looked at his benefactor for a moment longer before giving her his reply. "No."

"Very well," the vampire said quietly. She began to dissolve into thin air and drifted beneath the door. Nick followed on foot, wishing that he had the ability to travel the way she did. He was surprised to find the expansive hall deserted. Cautiously he walked the length of the hall until it made a sharp right into another hallway. In the middle of this hall, two of the Enforcers lay in a heap. Nick prodded one with the toe of his shoe. The vampire was unconscious but alive.

Nick followed along the hall until it ended, then he went down to the chateau's second floor. It was deserted as well. He heard excited murmurings from the vampires assembled downstairs, and he followed the sound which soon ended abruptly.

By the time Nick reached the top of the staircase leading down into the foyer, the silence was broken. Vampires cried out as they were shoved by unseen hands as a path was being cleared towards LaCroix. A few of the vampires nearest the front doors tried to leave undetected but were slammed backwards by the invisible force while the doors and those leading to the side reception rooms suddenly slammed shut and bolted themselves.

Nick watched in awe as the Enforcers nearest LaCroix shrank back as the force concentrated itself into a mist before taking the form of the red-haired female vampire. Nick took more than a little satisfaction at the fear in the eyes of LaCroix and Alyce Hunter.

"What is the meaning of this?" the woman asked.

Although it took a few moments, LaCroix's indignation edged out his fear. He gestured to his burnt, cracking face. "The meaning is quite evident. I was nearly murdered, and I want justice."

A massively built Enforcer found his courage as well. He took a half-step forward, glared up at Nick, then addressed his superior. "Nicholas has violated the Code time and time again. He deserves punishment."

Nick's own fear leapt to life when the red-haired vampire calmly replied, "What you say is true, Mathias." The Enforcer's smug expression chilled Nick, until the woman continued, "However, Nicholas' transgressions have been unintentional."

"Unintentional?" LaCroix blurted out. "You are a fool if you believe that his near destruction of me was unintentional!" He froze the instant he realized that he was committing his own transgression by taking such a tone.

Nick watched with a nervous ache deep in the pit of his stomach as a malicious smile spread across the red-haired woman's beautiful face and saw LaCroix tremble. He could feel the woman's power brush over the inhabitants of the chateau and clutched at the stair railing as it passed him.

Janette shrieked as the boy vampire, Daniel, was seized by unseen hands and jerked a good twelve feet off the floor. Like a rag doll in the jaws of a vicious guard dog, he was swung back and forth, dashed against the left wall of the foyer and then the right and back again three or four times. Suddenly, his battered body was thrust upwards into the forty-foot high ceiling with a force that sent large cracks through the ornamental plaster like a rippling, growing spider web.

The assembled vampires cried out and shoved themselves back towards the walls, clearing the center of the foyer when Daniel's body began to fall. The boy hit the floor with a sickening thud then burst into flames. He was consumed within seconds.

The red-haired vampire, whose gaze never left LaCroix during the horrible spectacle, now smirked at him, gloating at the abject terror in LaCroix's ice-blue eyes. "Now, that was intentional."

The nervous silence that followed was broken only by the chiming of a tall case clock in a corner of the foyer. It was half-past four. The woman turned and walked away from LaCroix, Alyce, and the Enforcers, going to the stairs. With a side-long glance, she told Nick to follow her before she dissolved into nothingness.

She rematerialized back in the third floor bedroom where Natalie was. Nick stopped in the open doorway. The woman was obviously bothered by the fact that he was afraid to enter further. "You are safe with me." But Nick remained where he was. "I merely did what had to be done. The child was an abomination, becoming more twisted as the years passed."

Nick shut his eyes as the gruesome scene replayed itself in his mind. She was right, of course, and yet to see the boy dispatched with such cruelty...

If it's any consolation, he was dead the instant my mind touched his. The rest was done to set an example.

Nick opened his eyes. There was nothing he could do to change what had happened; he could only accept it. "I understand," he said quietly. He stepped into the room.

The woman smiled. "It will be dawn soon. Would you like to spend a day in the sun with your mortal love?"

Nick's jaw dropped. "The sun? Natalie?" The woman's smile broadened, and she held out her hand which Nick took, not feeling the powerful shock he felt the last time she touched him.

"Yes, I can give you a day in the sun. However, by this time tomorrow, everything will revert back -- you will once again be imprisoned by darkness and blood, and she will not remember anything that happened." She waited for Nick's answer. "You must decide quickly. Time is growing short."

Nick looked at the still-sleeping Natalie. "Will I remember all of it?"

"If you wish."

Nick looked back at the vampire. "Yes, I want to be like other men even if it is only for a day."

The vampire held out her left arm. Slowly, the skin over an artery in her wrist opened up. The blood welled up towards the edge of the incision but did not trickle out. She held her wrist up to Nick's lips.

Nick clamped his mouth over the wound and began to drink. Liquid fire coursed through his veins as the blood of the Chosen Few mingled with his own and seeped into his tissues. He drank eagerly, savoring the rich taste and exquisite feeling of power that it gave him. The Beast was not pleased when the blood stopped flowing on its own accord, but he suppressed the urge to bite the woman, and he pulled away.

The vampire lowered her arm and smiled indulgently at Nick. "How do you feel?"

Nick was speechless. How did he feel? He couldn't possibly explain it. He felt incredibly happy, fully alive. He felt a limitless peace and satisfaction, and his body actually vibrated with new life and power. He felt neither like a vampire nor a mere mortal.

Enjoy it while it lasts, my pet.

Natalie became instantly awake. She sat up, her mind spinning as she took in the scene before her. She was still here in the chateau and Nick was standing by the French windows looking at her while fiery golden rays of sun fell on him. She stared at him, not quite knowing what to think, finally settling

upon the conclusion that they had both died and gone to heaven. She gave a start when Nick spoke, "We're alive, Nat. We're both alive."

"Alive," she repeated quietly, still not believing that this was happening. She stared at Nick, feeling the warmth of his smile from across the room, yet missing the touch of sadness lurking beneath the surface.

"This is really happening, Nat. I'm normal, and I want to walk in the sun," he said, hold out his hands.

* * * * *

The electronic beeping of the alarm clock echoed through the quiet room. Natalie shut it off but didn't get out of bed right away as she usually did for she was too absorbed in trying to recall the details of her dream. The harder she concentrated, however, the more it seemed to fade until finally she gave up trying to remember the details. It had been incredible, of that she was certain, but all she really knew was that Nick was there and that he had been making love to her like a mortal man.

It seemed so real. In fact, her skin still tingled from his touch. She sighed. Obviously, it was nothing but wishful thinking.

* * * * *

Nick straightened his tie one last time before leaving the apartment to pick of Natalie for the precinct Christmas party. He also made a mental note to look more serious once he arrived at the party. Schanke had been on his case because of his bright attitude these past weeks following his "day in the sun".

Schanke hadn't been the only one to notice the change in his demeanor, and Nick took their suppositions and innuendoes as to the cause of his good humor with a grain of salt, allowing them to think whatever they wanted since they'd never believe the truth if he could tell it.

Nick's good humor took a three hundred and eighty degree turn the instant Natalie opened her front door. "C'mon in," she mumbled.

Nick followed her into the apartment. She seemed fine when he spoke to her late last night and now she looked worse than something the cat dragged in. She was wearing an old chenille bathrobe that was buttoned unevenly. Her hair looked as though she had been trying to pull it out by the roots, and her dark-circled eyes had a burning, faraway look in them.

"What' wro--"

Before Nick could finish his question, Natalie began to sob. He comforted her as best he could, waiting until her tears subsided to ask what the matter was.

"Oh, Nick, it's terrible!" Natalie paused and sniffled before continuing. "It sounds stupid, but I swear that I don't know how it happened. I really don't know. I do know that it's true because I did a dozen tests myself and this morning I went to see my own doctor, and she confirmed it. Under any other circumstances I think I might be happy if I just knew how in the hell it could have happened..." Natalie's voice trailed off, and she began to pace the floor. She stopped and looked at Knight. "Oh, Nick, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know, Nat. Maybe if you told me exactly what's wrong?"

Natalie rolled her eyes, realizing that she had been rambling as if Nick knew what was happening. A look of bewilderment flashed across her face when she felt that he should know, but she pushed this thought aside. How could Nick, of all people, know? "You'll never believe it, never."

"Believe what?"

"I'm six weeks pregnant, Nick, and I swear to God that I don't know how it happened or who the father is." Natalie watched as what little color there was in the vampire's cheeks suddenly drained away. She spoke, but he didn't seem to hear. She stepped closer, shaking his arm, but received no response. He simply continued to stare into space.



David Addams

Listening to the story

Being a journalist normally means covering the "big story." Most journalists jump at the heart-wrenching stories ripped from today's headlines and hope somehow the tale is talked about over a cup of coffee or at the water cooler.

Recently, one of our own is rapidly becoming the topic of conversation. From 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., there is a man who slowly, but surely, is gaining popularity in the Queen's city. Known only as the Nightcrawler, this melancholy voice speaks to one's soul. The disk-jockey's pebble-ground voice milks the airwaves as if the rock of ages was alive.

Who is the face behind the voice? Is he married? Does he have children? What makes a rock-and-roll radio station suddenly turn over the airwaves to this violin-playing sage?

The answers are obvious when researching recent facts. Since the Nightcrawler radio broadcast began, people are listening. According to a recent Canadian radio poll, the station will soon air the show throughout Canada. Surprising for a station which all but closed down last year.

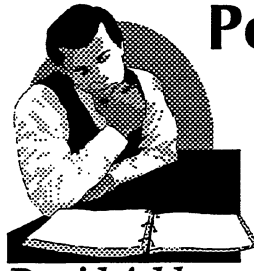
Static is hardly what this reporter heard last night. The voice's allure was overpowering. His show was personal. Unlike the Ricki Lakes and Oprah Winfreys, when he spoke, he didn't need to qualify his thoughts and advice. He doesn't use vulgarities or spank people while morning drivers play with themselves on the freeway. This man is a throwback to classic radio. For lack of a better comparison, when his show is on, everything else is off. Listening to this man is like eating chocolate without all those nasty little calories.

There is something else mysterious about this night-time disk jockey. No one has ever seen him. Despite numerous requests for appearances, the Nightcrawler remains ever elusive. His face left to the imagination; his soul owned by a modern-day poet.

Perhaps it is better we don't know who this mysterious man is. As I have often learned, things revealed in the light of day will sometimes get you burned. The mystery in this man ... this Nightcrawler ... is something better left unknown.

To know him, all we have to do is listen.
Until tomorrow morning ...

May 10, 1995



David Addams

People fight back

When I mentioned being the talk around coffee tables and water coolers, I never dreamt yesterday's commentary would spark such a response.

It seems the voice ... the Nightcrawler ... is a bit more elusive than I originally thought. No one who called me has ever seen this man — not even his supervisor.

Each morning, the tape from the previous night's show is wrapped and is placed in the middle of his desk. Any contracts the Nightcrawler needs to sign or questions his supervisor has, are left in a clean, neat pile.

The man doesn't even know the Nightcrawler's real name.

That in itself makes me curious. But my curiosity only increased as the night went on.

Due to the readers' response, I decided to listen to the show and hear what the sage would say. It was a little disheartening when my column wasn't even mentioned. Like a person driving by an accident site, I continued to listen.

For 25 minutes, there was nothing on the air except the sound of a watch ticking. The mechanical tick-tick demanded attention in my thoughts. The sound pulsed through me ... hammering in perfect time.

Part of me wanted to scream out. Was something wrong? Was I listening to a murder? Is this the end of the Nightcrawler?

Ever so slowly, I heard the sound of an old wooden door close. Heavy steps thundered through the airways as the monotonous ticking continued. "So nice to get some fresh air," he chuckled to himself as if nothing had happened. Slowly, I could hear him pick up his violin and began to play.

The saying "Death before dead air" obviously has no meaning in the Nightcrawler's realm. Instead, the lack of sound is another instrument to be played, like the violin's wailing.

Unlike the Sage's sad dirge, the station's owners are celebrating. The Nightcrawler has signed the contracts which will air his show nationwide.

Who knows, perhaps the Nightcrawler's mystique will reveal itself.

To find out, all we have to do is stay tuned.
Until tomorrow morning...



David Addams

Night's Calling

Last night I did something I haven't done in years — I fell asleep early. Somehow before falling into the land of dreams, I remembered to program my alarm to wake me in time for the Nightcrawler's evening outing.

But instead of the alarm's scream, I rose from the dead to the sound of a different noise.

"Mr. Addams? Mr. David Addams?" a familiar voice resonated. "I understand you have been looking for me."

The Nightcrawler was talking to me. I wanted to dazzle him with a perfect response — something which idealistically would have sounded like a well-seasoned professional instead of child meeting his hero for the first time. I muttered something that sounded like "Uh .. Yassir ..."

"Sir ... I like that ... It shows you respect me. So tell me, what would you like to know?"

Trying to change into a journalist, get my mind on track and ask questions everyone of us wants to know, was a challenge this 30 year old was ready for.

Coffee clutched and water drinkers, get ready. Here is what we all wanted to know.

The man ... the Nightcrawler ... is older than we think. He had held several professions, including police officer, investigator, sailor, political advisor and numerous others. His violin is a Stradivarius, which is, according to him, the last one the man made.

He described himself as an elegant bachelor, tall, Romanesque in stature, with a passion for "getting under people's skin."

Why did he call me?

"To put your mind to rest, my writer friend." He mockingly laughed. "Besides, what you don't know could easily be dangerous."

As he hung up, I pondered those words — easily be dangerous. Hmm ... I've always heard knowledge is power. The little bit we were given only makes me want to know more.

Last night's show was dedicated to the searchers and those who make the most of their lives.

I wonder, was he talking to me or warning me?

Until tomorrow morning ...



Vision Quest

David Addams

The first rule of journalism has always been, "Never listen to your editor until the story is finished." Then, and only then, should the story be edited. Unfortunately, my editor and I never listened to rules other people told us.

"You didn't tell us anything we didn't already know!" He shouted after reading yesterday's column. This invoked the dreaded rule number two: "Listen to your editor ... or else."

So I rescheduled my evening plans and trudged down to the street below the radio station. With my curiosity piqued (and job on the line), I had to find out his name.

To do this, though, I had to use techniques more common to detectives than journalist. That's right, I listened to last night's show with a styrofoam coffee firmly planted in on hand and a set of binoculars in the other.

I watched others leave the radio station. After a while, I became aware of a tall, lean man, dressed impeccably in black who had stopped and stared at me. His pale face and neon-white hair intensified the force which his steel-blue eye bore directly into me. For a moment ... nothing. Like a deer caught in headlights, I couldn't move.

The man smiled hungrily, then nodded. He was gone.

"I know you want to meet me," I heard through the radio. "You will ... soon. Maybe even tomorrow night. Until then, remember, when the hunter is hunted, the chase truly begins."

Jumping to change the station, I realized the coffee in my hands was now on my lap. But even smelling the mixture of blue jeans and my own scorched flesh didn't bring me back to reality until a few minutes had passed.

This Nightcrawler is truly darkness' master. He controls our hidden fears and desires, gently shoving them forward until pulses become thrumming and mouths become deserts.

"The chase truly begins ..."

Perhaps this is why people want to know who this man is. He dominates the air like he does his life — by his own rules.

This evening he will come for me. Perhaps the hunter will be ready. I do not know ...

Until tomorrow morning ...



Too Much Time

David Addams

I hate clocks. With God-like control, they regulate everything in our lives. When working, people pray for more time to get things done. How many times a week are the words, "There's not enough time in the day," spoken?

For me though, the clock joined forces with the Nightcrawler, taunting me. This disk-jockey ... this terror in black ... was coming.

This is easy for you readers. The events I am now writing about have already happened. The drama has hopefully been played out. The time it takes you to read this is about the same time it takes to finish off your bowl of cereal — complete with an extra spoonful of sugar to get you going.

For me, each second was like the feeling of falling out of bed right before landing on the ground. I knew I was going to hit the floor, but I didn't know what would happen then. Would I break an arm? Or fracture my knee? Would I hit my head and die? Would anyone care?

Sitting at my kitchen table, I waited. Looking around my house, I noticed it needed dusting. So I did that. Before long I had everything picked up, my floor waxed and I was even thinking about cleaning the garage.

As I headed out the door, he was there smiling.

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to know you listen to me," he said without entering. I think he was waiting for an invitation.

After offering him a seat, I looked at him again. I didn't know what to say, so I decided to let him control the conversation. In person, his voice's allure is even more overpowering. Like thick brown chocolate, it satiates your need for sound.

At the time, though, the only thing I heard was silence.

"What do you want to know?" He smiled, as if already preparing to answer.

"Your name." I blurted out.

"It will cost you something." He laughed.

"Do you really want to know?"

Wordlessly I nodded.

"LaCroix. My name is Lucien LaCroix."

Until tomorrow morning ...



Other Mothers

David Addams

At my house we don't celebrate Mother's Day.

Don't get me wrong, there is nothing more special than the woman who gave birth to you. She should be honored. Not only with love and warm memories, but with appreciation.

Only, I don't have any warm memories of "Mom." I never saw her at the basketball games. She was never there to get the family together to go to grandpa and grandma's house for Sunday dinner.

My mother died giving birth to me. Instead of honoring her memory, my brothers and sisters renamed the day as "Daddy's Mother's Day." Dad never remarried; before it was fashionable for a father to take care of the brood, he did.

When talking to my sisters, they always laugh about how he made those teen-age growing pains seem not so bad. He was the one who took my sisters to buy those "women's things" — much to the teasing of his friends.

He also made sure all of us knew we were loved and special. A tough job to do when working all day and then coming home to raise a family.

Last Daddy's Mother's Day I asked him why he worked so hard keeping us together and never took time for himself.

With a sparkle in his eyes he gave me a few simple words to live by. "When your mother died, I lost my best friend. She made me promise to not only be your parent but also be your best friend. It is easy to love someone. The hard part is to like them as well."

I think his words were something we have always known. When I look at how my sister is raising her little ones, I know Dad's love is there too. But there is another reason he enjoys this day. It's when he gets to see all his kids (both his own and those who have been nick-named the "Outlaws") and grandkids. Each family is strong enough to stand on their own. Because of Dad, they ... no, *I* know there is always someone out there looking out for me.

Isn't that what this day is supposed to be all about.

Happy Mother's Day, all you Moms. And Happy Daddy's Mother Day, Dad.

Until tomorrow morning ...



Time on my side

David Addams I used to think time was my enemy. But over the last few nights, I realized time isn't as important as what we do with it. This lesson I learned from time's master, Lucien LaCroix.

Before last week, the late-night disk jockey known only as the Nightcrawler was a voice without a face. It is hard to believe how much power his mystery and all those nasty little secrets left to our imagination have when locked away from us.

When the lock is opened and what's inside is revealed, nothing is left but a choice. Do we shrink into darkness and hide? Or should we face these personal demons?

With LaCroix's help, I accepted time's challenge and began my own personal crusade. It may not be as majestic as those ancient kings and knights had. Instead, this journey through time is my own.

As Arthur was advised by Merlin, we — each of the Nightcrawler's listeners — are led by him. We can either choose to follow or tune out the message. Those of us who continue to listen join his "family." We are the Nightcrawler's children.

It may seem I'm obsessing over a simple man who talks for a few hours each night while insomniacs rule the earth. Ironic, isn't it? Those who listen in darkness see the light while those who wake with the morning's first rays are blissfully ignorant. The morning-risers race to the freeways to wait before getting to the office, listening to the radio hoping to "catch up" on yesterday's events.

The coffee clutched and water-cooler gossips spend their time discussing events from last night, yesterday or the week before. Haven't we all gotten tired of discussing when Marcia Clark gets her hair cut? Something else, though, is stealing more than just the headlines. Time. Time is robbing them of their future by focusing on the past.

My memories are a shield against what may happen in the future. Like LaCroix's challenge, there are other secrets time allows me to explore.

I don't fully understand what has happened in the past or the future; I only know the journey is important.

After all, time will wait.

Until tonight ...

A WHISPER OF HUMANITY

Denysé M. Bridger

The atmosphere of The Raven was closed and thick when Faith Prescott finally made her way into the heart of the nightclub. She couldn't suppress the whisper of ice that persisted near the base of her spine, a wordless warning that she'd been unable to find a reason for throughout the long evening. Maybe she was just tired, nothing more mysterious than that. It had been an exceedingly long day, one that had quickly led into an evening that had been longer still. When she'd asked Nick's partner to suggest a place where she could enjoy a drink before heading back to her hotel, Schanke had told her about this club.

It wasn't exactly *The Loft*, she thought, and smiled as she envisioned her favourite nightclub near Los Angeles. She shook off the opposing imagery and directed her attention to her immediate surroundings. She smiled and her look wandered openly over the chandeliers, the waterfalls of chains, and the gleaming columns that decorated the club. There was something darkly exotic about this place. *And the people in it*, she added mentally as her gaze strayed without conscious direction.

She glanced at the myriad of bizarrely dressed people mingling within the spacious room and felt another shudder when one of the young men at the bar smiled at her. If the expression was meant as an invitation of any kind, Faith wasn't eager to accept the company. She pulled her lightweight cotton jacket closer, cursing her own stupidity for wearing the sleeveless wool top that was completely inadequate to combat Toronto's late Autumn chill. The jacket was black and the full, flowing skirt was a deep shade of teal, and the billowing material draped her legs to only a few inches above floor length. Her high-heeled boots matched the creamy colour of her sweater and the small shoulder bag she carried.

At thirty, Faith quite often looked barely twenty without her make-up, and that vanity was more a necessity to keep her age from being obscured than a ritual she enjoyed. She had dark brown hair that fell in soft waves around her shoulders, and equally dark eyes. She was tall and athletically built, not beautiful, but attractive in an aloof fashion. She tended toward solitude, and it seemed to communicate itself to other people since she was reputed to be cold and unapproachable. Her co-workers usually gave her plenty of space once they'd been politely kept at arm's length a few times.

"Can I help you?"

Faith turned at the softly accented enquiry, her smile automatic when she found herself eye to eye with a stunning, slender brunette. French, her mind noted as soon as the woman spoke again.

"We have a very strict age policy," she informed the newcomer. "You don't appear old enough for a place such as this."

Faith was stunned into momentary silence. It had been a *very* long time since anyone had mistaken her age this totally. Firmly convinced the brunette couldn't possibly be serious, Faith started to pass her. A firm hand on her velvet covered arm halted her before she was able to take a single step.

"You haven't answered me."

"I thought you were joking." When there was no visible change in the lovely woman's expression, Faith sighed. She dug into her purse and produced the police shield that would not only prove her age, but her ability to take care of whatever she might encounter in a nightclub. Faith opened the leather case and held it out for inspection. The brunette took the case and read the information imprinted on the card. "You wouldn't require a birth certificate as well, would you?" Faith wondered, a hint of ironic smile curved full lips into a soft expression.

This time it was the French woman who smiled. She nodded a small apology, handed back the police shield, and linked her arm loosely through Faith's.

"My name is Janette. I own The Raven."

"Faith Prescott, but you know that already, don't you, Mademoiselle?" Faith added with a laugh.

"What brings you to my club, Faith?" Janette inquired, her dark head tilted to one side as she measured the other woman. Faith Prescott bore no resemblance to Janette's mental image of police officers,

and something about the woman intrigued the beautiful vampire. Perhaps it was the unmistakable aura of detachment that enveloped the woman.

Faith slid onto a stool as two were vacated the moment Janette approached the bar. The beautiful Frenchwoman ordered drinks, and Faith let her look roam. "You have a most interesting nightclub, Janette."

Janette laughed quietly. "That is one way of putting it," she agreed and slid a glittering crystal glass across the gleaming bar-top. Faith accepted the wine and lifted her glass in a cheerful toast.

* * *

Across the room, another figure watched the interaction with growing interest.

* * *

Several drinks later, Faith was definitely starting to loosen up and laugh a little. She no longer shuddered every time one of the *Raven's* patrons passed her, and Janette's lively conversation was like the wine, intoxicating and diverting. Faith found she was enjoying herself tremendously, despite the headache that had begun to pound behind her eyes.

"How long are you planning to be in Toronto?" Janette wondered, and leaned closer to murmur the words into her companion's ear.

"I'll probably be heading back home in a couple of days." Faith refused another refill of the wine and stared into Janette's dark blue eyes. "I was here to coordinate a special investigation with a friend of yours," she told the other woman.

"A friend of mine?" Janette asked, genuinely startled by the disclosure.

"Nick Knight."

Janette considered that revelation and frowned unconsciously. If this woman was a friend of Nick's, there might be a great deal of trouble visited upon The Raven before the night was over. She could feel his interest from the other side of the room, and now it bothered her.

"Nickola is one of my oldest friends," Janette said with a forced smile. "You should have told me sooner, I would have treated you to the best vintage in the cellar."

"I think I've had too much as it is," Faith admitted around a yawn. "Wine always makes me sleepy."

"There is a cosy room in the back," Janette told her. She slid off her bar stool then led Faith toward the door. "You can lie down for a few minutes and catch your breath." She held the door open and smiled again when Faith slipped past her. "Stay as long as you wish," she invited. "I have to see to some minor business."

* * *

The room itself was shadowed and rich, velvet trappings kept the atmosphere subdued and hushed. There was a table, for private dining, she assumed, a low couch, and in the corner two overstuffed armchairs. Between the chairs, adorning a low marble table was an ornate ebony and ivory chess set.

Faith went to look at the ancient set, and her breath escaped her in a low whistle of appreciation when she examined the intricacy of the workmanship that had gone into the pieces. The king, in particular, was a work of art. After a close, near-reverent look at the piece, she carefully placed the king back on his square. She lifted another figure and fingered the knight that had resided incorrectly next to the king. She was both surprised and intrigued to see that the face of the white knight bore a striking resemblance to the handsome detective with whom she'd recently been working.

"The board is just over three hundred years old."

Faith whirled at the sound of the words, and an involuntary shiver caressed her spine. The richly textured voice was soft and beguiling with a hint of mocking indulgence tainting the resonance. It was a spell of enchantment, and she loved the alluring sound already.

Faith put the chess piece back on the board and waited.

"Janette told me you had left. But, I thought I noticed her showing you into this little hideaway," the stranger commented, his voice like a velvet growl. He came further into the room and moved to the

chessboard. Absently, he repositioned the knight that Faith had moved to the correct tile, then he sat in one of the chairs that were on either side of the table that supported the gameboard.

Faith felt another jolt of recognition when she realized this man was the King who ruled the meticulously arranged chessboard. The ice in the newcomer's blue eyes chilled the young woman even as it drew her to him. She instinctively put some distance between herself and the man who watched every movement she made. This tall, elegant stranger was overwhelming in his personal presence. She let her look wander momentarily, taking in the regal manner and rich attire. He looked roughly forty, had white-blond hair, strikingly contoured features, and the most piercing sapphire coloured eyes that Faith had ever seen. He was tall and very slender, long legs crossed casually as he enjoyed her appraising look. His smile was complaisant and faintly curious.

Faith continued to stare at him, despite her certainty that she was being laughed at for her gawking interest. She was behaving like a smitten teenager, but even that self-condemning observation couldn't tear her eyes from him. The sense of barely contained power within him was a near tangible cloak that surrounded him and whispered danger to anyone within his seductive orbit. Her heart began to pound as she contemplated exactly what it was his unexpected presence might lead her to this night.

"I am Lucien LaCroix," the vampire said with a tilt of his head. "And you are?" LaCroix prompted when she seemed disinclined to return his introduction.

"Faith, Faith Prescott." To her relief, there was no betraying tremor in the words. She had half-expected her voice to be little more than a squeak of nerves.

"What do you want, LaCroix?" Janette demanded as she entered the room and saw Faith's enraptured gaze settled on the vampire's smiling face. A single glance at the aristocratic features gave her the real answer, and she resisted the urge to snarl at him.

"Another drink would be lovely, my dear," LaCroix answered with a smile. "The house specialty is particularly good tonight," he added with a nod. For a moment, he thought she was going to openly defy him, then she whirled away, her stare icy with scorn.

"As you wish," she whispered through tightly clenched teeth.

Faith was startled by the fury she felt in Janette as she watched the *Raven's* owner leave. Her confusion escalated when LaCroix's laughter drifted across the short space between them.

"I think I'd better be going," Faith decided, suddenly uncomfortably aware of the quiet in the room. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was cut off from the rest of the world in this place, and the instinct to run grew. LaCroix had risen, silently, and had crossed the room to her side. His hand on her arm held her despite her assertions about leaving.

She started to withdraw when LaCroix's eyes pinned her again, and she felt herself drowning in a growing wash of ocean blue. It took every ounce of will she possessed, but she managed to break the hypnotic hold long moments later, and stumbled back a few awkward steps.

LaCroix let her go, then caught her wrist in a painful grip when she tried a second time to walk away. He was intrigued by this lovely, temperamental young woman; the combination of intelligence, innocence and lethal capabilities was a paradox the vampire found fascinating. Another name hovered on the fringe of his memory, and LaCroix pushed it aside without acknowledgement. He loosened his grip on Faith's wrist, long fingers smoothed over the faint bruise showing there. He continued the caressing motion as he forced her eyes to again meet his. The shadow of pain was fading already, and was quickly being replaced by what he knew was unexpected, perhaps unwelcome, pleasure.

Without releasing his grip on her wrist, LaCroix walked behind the couch as he pressed her into a seat on the cushions. He let go of Faith's hand, but before she could move away, his fingers found the sensitive area around her temples and started to massage gently. Silken hair brushed teasingly at LaCroix's fingertips, and equally soft skin woke a throb of desire deep within him. It had been a very long time since he'd taken someone like this woman.

Faith sank deeper into the cushions of the couch, some inner instinct perfectly content to bask in the sensation of warmth and comfort LaCroix's touch was creating. Another voice, louder but less powerful somehow, warned her that she was running out of time to escape. A soft sigh escaped her when the stroking fingers at her temples brushed across her cheekbones and continued the caress along her jaw. She shivered when she felt the awakening of her body growing from pleasant comfort, to longing of another kind.

When Faith felt LaCroix's cool lips touch her cheek, reason flooded in and she tried to pull away with a jolt. The vampire stopped the move with an effortlessness that was unnerving. Irrational panic made Faith

repeat the attempt, this time with greater strength; strength that would have easily dislodged any other person. LaCroix's hands closed on her shoulders and she shuddered when strong fingers began kneading tense muscles into a state of contented relaxation.

"Don't resist me," LaCroix purred, his voice like rough silk. "Enjoy what you're feeling. You have no idea how much pleasure we can share."

"No ... " It took several tries, but Faith was finally able to voice the rejection, emphasising it with a jerky shake of her head. A tiny moan spilled from her lips when LaCroix ignored her and Faith felt his searching, seductive fingers smoothing over the curve of her shoulders before gliding lower. LaCroix's lips moved with his searching hands, and Faith shuddered in a spasm of pure sensual pleasure when she felt his tongue caress the corner of her jaw, then trek downward to the sensitive curve at the base of her neck. When the stimulation was withdrawn seconds later, she couldn't suppress the gasp of disappointment that accompanied the loss.

LaCroix's laughter was taunting as he again changed his position and returned to face the woman who was now his willing captive. He dropped to his knees and spread her thighs as he leaned into Faith's neck. This time, his lips sought, and found the pulse of life near the hollow of her throat. The erratic throb was like an invitation to LaCroix's aroused senses, but he deliberately denied himself, unexpectedly eager to prolong this exchange. His hands began a stroking discovery of well muscled thighs and he eased away enough to look into Faith's eyes, wanting to read the responses he could feel in the young body. Faith's lips were parted with the effort to breathe through the erotic exhilaration she was experiencing, and there was only a ghost of lingering resistance in her dark eyes. A spark of denial that was a natural part of Faith, and just beyond her control. Just beyond them both -- for the moment.

LaCroix continued to stare at the enticing mouth, then he granted himself the luxury of losing his eye contact with Faith. He leaned forward until his lips covered the fullness of hers. When he met no real protest, he deepened the kiss, allowed his tongue to search the warm depths. His desire became a pang of intense hunger that shuddered through him when he felt the unexpected, answering thrust of Faith's tongue delving into his mouth with surprising urgency.

* * *

Janette was seated at the bar again, her rage telegraphing itself to everyone within her orbit. She could feel the wide circles made to avoid her, and felt perverse satisfaction at the awareness that many of those present were decidedly afraid of her just now. She was almost spitting with indignation, and the 'wine' in her hand no longer appeased her mood in any fashion.

"Damn you!" she hissed in an undertone.

"I hope you don't mean me," a new voice observed with mild amusement.

Startled much more than she should have been, Janette swivelled the bar stool and smiled.

"Of course not, Nickola."

Nick surveyed her with a critical eye, and perched on the stool next to her. "Then who is in danger of damnation?" he asked with more curiosity than genuine interest. He had other concerns at the moment. But, winning Janette's help usually meant having to ease into the need for it, so, he played the friendly game of banter.

"No one you need worry over, I assure you, mon amour." She looked back at him, quickly and accurately reading his mood. "You didn't come here for conversation, Nick. What is it you are trying to ask of me this time?"

"Have you seen anybody new here tonight?"

Suspicion flared within her, but it never reached her outer composure. "Many people drift in and out, Nickola. Am I expected to keep a record of them for you?"

"This one's a cop," Knight told her, his voice hard. "An out of town cop named Faith Prescott. Schanke told her she might like this place."

"Perhaps she would?" Janette suggested with a tilt of her head. "Many do."

"Was she here, Janette?" Nick demanded, quickly losing patience with the verbal fencing.

"No."

Something in the flat reply sparked suspicion in Nick, and he turned her eyes back to meet his when she looked away.

"When was she here?"

She glared at him, but offered no answer.

"Janette!" He grabbed her arm, not bothering to be gentle, nor to masque his considerable irritation.

"Where is she?"

She jerked her arm free of his grasp and considered her answer. She quickly decided it would be much easier to get the young woman out of her club than risk Nick's wrath. There was a certain amount of enjoyment in the knowledge that this would deny LaCroix of his prize, too. And, she added mentally, he would blame Nick for that loss, not her.

"She is with LaCroix." She dropped the news with a toss of her head, and laughed as he rushed toward the back room.

* * *

Faith felt her hips pushing forward as she reached up to touch the silver head bent to hers. Her fingers brushed through the soft, short hair and came to rest against the back of LaCroix's neck. She moaned as another intense spasm of passion consumed her, and when LaCroix's fingers began a new discovery of the firm fullness of her aching breasts, Faith's head swam with the overload of sensuous pleasure. Her tongue traced the vampire's teeth, and she tasted blood when she encountered the razor sharp edge of fangs. Pain replaced passion and she was suddenly choking with fear and revulsion.

* * *

LaCroix felt the abrupt change in his prey and was thrown off balance when Faith pushed violently at him. Angered, he grabbed a handful of thick, dark hair and yanked her head to one side with a painful jerk. His lips touched the tender throat and he ignored the hissed intake of breath that accompanied her futile attempts to push him away again.

* * *

The room spun away at a weird angle and Faith slid from the couch as she was released with shocking suddenness. Through a blur of mist and grey fog, she felt her stomach roiling and her mind objecting to the nightmarish spectacle she was witnessing.

* * *

LaCroix recovered quickly from the blow that had sent him reeling away from Faith, and he turned glowing eyes to the one who'd dared to strike him. *Nicholas!* He should have known. Even through the lust-enhanced hunger, LaCroix was aware of Faith inching across the floor in an effort to escape. The scent of her fear was as tempting as her passion of minutes earlier. He'd find this one again, he promised himself, if she were fortunate enough to escape him after all this night.

"You are going to push me too far one day, Nicholas," LaCroix warned, his eyes still blazed fury at the younger vampire.

"Maybe," Nick agreed, one eye watched Faith's progress as he tried to fight down the urge to kill. "Tonight I intend to see that a friend remains safe."

"This beautiful creature is a friend of yours?" LaCroix asked, once more taking firm control of both himself and the situation. "Your taste improves, Nicholas."

The mantle of ice had returned. Nick knew there would be no further need to fight -- not tonight, at any rate. LaCroix was considering another time and another venue for their next meeting. Nick had no illusions about it being a pleasant encounter. If anything, he sensed death in the other's mind. True and lasting death. It was not the first time since LaCroix's return that Nick wondered when the master vampire would demand his retribution -- in full. So far, despite frequent confrontations, LaCroix had not seriously attempted to destroy him. Yet, Nick felt the time was nearing.

"Take her, Nicholas. You've risked more than you know for her," LaCroix whispered softly. He watched the wariness grow within the former knight's deep blue eyes then filter into Nick's expressive

features. The ancient vampire laughed quietly as Knight grabbed Faith's arm and helped her to her feet. They were out of the room without another word being uttered.

* * *

LaCroix walked the silent room, his stride casual, a trace of smile hovered on his lips. The merest hint of Faith Prescott's blood lingered on his tongue, and he savoured the taste with amused indulgence. The chess set drew his attention again and he strolled over to the antique board. He picked up the ivory knight and examined it for several long moments, then crushed it to powder in his hand. He let the pale dust sift through his fingers and fall to the board, obscuring the gleaming surface. He picked up the ebony queen and smiled, then dropped the piece into his pocket.

* * *

When Janette finally dared to go back to the room, she was anticipating an enraged confrontation. What she found was more disturbing. She glanced at the chess board, and her stomach churned wildly when she saw the powdery remains of the white knight. She slumped weakly into a chair, not yet noticing the absence of the second piece, the dark queen. The one LaCroix had just laid claim to ...

* * *

"Are you out of your mind, Schank?" Nick asked as he strode into the squad room and spotted his partner. The outrage on Don's features was wasted on Knight and he resisted the temptation to bare his fangs and scare ten years off the detective's life.

"Would you like to elaborate on that, partner?" Schanke replied with a smile that earned him another withering glare. "Geez, what is your problem, Knight?"

"Faith Prescott," Nick informed the other detective. "Why, of all the possible places in Toronto, did you send her to The Raven?"

"She wanted to have a drink, Nick," he shrugged. It wasn't like the lady in question couldn't take care of herself. Plus, it wasn't his business what she wanted to do after hours. He'd suggested The Raven simply because it crossed his mind. He said as much to his irate friend.

"Is there something going on with you and this L.A. lady?" Schanke prodded with a grin. "She's a nice lookin' broad, Nick. If I didn't have Myra, I'd be tempted myself."

Nick felt another flare of temper, and squashed it. Schanke hadn't made any real error, and it wasn't his partner he was really annoyed with anyway. He waved aside the disagreement, and glanced at the time. He'd left Faith at her hotel nearly an hour ago. His shift was almost history. He'd forget it for now, and check on her tomorrow before he came in to work.

* * *

It hadn't taken long to find the correct hotel, and LaCroix stared down at the woman sleeping soundly in the large bed. She was lovely, and a smile flitted across his features when he recalled how passionately she'd responded to his caresses. She would have made a delightful diversion for the night if Nicholas hadn't disrupted their interlude.

He sighed, unconscious of the reaction. Faith stirred beneath the blankets, and echoed the sound as a soft, wistful whisper. Was she dreaming of him? LaCroix wondered, oddly pleased by the whimsy. It had been an extremely long time since anyone had looked on him with pleasure and welcome. Before he could prevent the fall, his thoughts had trapped him in a void he scarcely acknowledged even in his most private moments.

He was lonely.

The children he loved best had rejected him. Nicholas had almost killed him. Janette tolerated his presence because she hadn't yet figured out a safe way to avoid him. He felt exiled from those he had once created to shield him from the very emotions he was now experiencing. Yet, this woman, this mortal, would

have willingly opened herself to his possession tonight. She would have given her body for him to sate his lust and her blood to feed his hunger.

Yes. Faith Prescott had wanted him. The ancient vampire had felt the repressed desire hidden deeply within her, just as she'd briefly tasted the freedom his passion could give her. Her isolation was bred into her psyche, and she was capable of understanding what true loneliness could be. For a few minutes, LaCroix permitted himself to consider what taking her might mean to his own solitude.

He left the bedside and walked out onto the balcony that overlooked the glittering city of Toronto. He sat and stretched long legs before him as the sheer curtains fluttered in the light Autumn breeze. He watched the woman in the bed, attuned his senses to the steady beat of her heart.

She was intelligent and inquisitive, as well as attractive. She'd make a pleasant companion. Taking her would be exhilarating. He smiled, the expression held a slight trace of mockery. Nicholas would be enraged. The former knight had claimed the woman as a friend, and LaCroix's plans would infuriate his child. An added bonus, he decided darkly.

As the night passed in speculative thought, LaCroix's powerful mind invaded Faith's. By the time dawn approached, the master vampire knew her better than she knew herself. He rose from his vigil and went back into the shadowy bedroom. He sat on the edge of her bed and smiled when she instinctively turned toward him, her lips parted to invite his kiss.

Instead of the caress she silently asked for, LaCroix brushed a lock of dark hair off her forehead. She murmured softly, and he let one long finger whisper over the curve of her mouth. His hand dipped into his jacket pocket and he withdrew the dark queen. He placed the chess piece on the bedside table and left.

* * *

Throughout the day, Faith had regained consciousness in brief spurts. This time, she was determined to stay awake. She cursed softly as she tried to persuade her aching body to move from the bed, but the lethargy in her limbs refused to accommodate her. For several minutes she stared at the ceiling. It wasn't like she had to get up, she reasoned with herself. The case had been cleared up the previous evening, and she'd told her captain that she was staying in Toronto for a few more days, on holiday. Caruso hadn't been pleased with that decision but he wasn't in a position to argue too heatedly when she'd just wrapped up a major case -- with Nicholas Knight's help, she amended automatically.

She glanced at her watch, saw it was just after five in the afternoon, and gasped in surprise. It took another minute to decide that she didn't really give a damn, and she rolled onto her stomach and stretched languidly in the bed. Her nightgown twisted around her and on impulse, she peeled it off and tossed it on the floor. The satiny sheets felt deliciously smooth next to her naked skin, and she shivered with the purely sensual pleasure. Her eyes closed and she drifted back into sleep ...

* * *

Nick smiled as the maid unlocked the suite door with obvious reluctance, then glared at him suspiciously.

"She is a friend," he assured the small woman, "I'm just worried about her because she hasn't been taking calls all day." When the woman continued to look sceptical, he gave up and slipped into the dark rooms.

It was nearly eight o'clock and Faith hadn't replied to any of the numerous messages he'd left with the desk. It had taken his police shield to get any information out of the clerk, and he'd quickly discovered that she hadn't been seen at all that day. The uneasiness that had been building over the past hour died instantly when he walked into the bedroom and saw she was asleep.

He was about to turn and leave when a low moan from the bed made him cross the room. He knew his mistake as soon as he reached her. The blankets had been thrown aside, and all that covered her was the lightweight satin sheet. A single glance made it clear she wore nothing beneath the ivory-coloured cover.

Faith's body twisted enticingly, writhing to the demand of an invisible lover. Her head pressed back into the pillow and the smooth column of her neck was revealed in the beam of moonlight that bathed the room in ethereal light. Her hands moved over her body, caressed and aroused her further as she sighed blissfully ...

* * *

... LaCroix laughed quietly as he held her bound in the throes of passion. He sharpened the images, flooded her mind and her body with the intensity of his hunger, and the depth of his lust ...

* * *

Faith's body spasmed and she cried out in combined pain and ecstasy as her hips rose from the bed. Nick turned to leave her and froze as his gaze fell on the dark queen. The piece was lying on the floor, staring up at him with guileless wonder. The realisation of LaCroix's presence chilled him to the bone. He bent to retrieve the piece and closed his eyes against the wave of unleashed longing that battered his senses. Faith's dream was reaching to encompass him, and he felt an unwanted surge of desire as he turned back to her. The sheet had fallen away from her body as she curled toward her unknown lover.

The balcony doors were open, the filmy curtains blown aside by the night air as it billowed them inward. The moon, full and brilliant in the ebony sky shone like a light on the bed. Faith Prescott was bathed in a pale, silvery-white glow, the sheen of perspiration that filmed her body made her seem almost translucent in the spectral light. Her breasts were heaving with her efforts to breathe normally, her nipples erect and firm, clearly visible in the bright radiance of the moonlight. Nick's gaze moved over her in spite of his awareness that he should leave. The scent of her arousal and the erratic pounding of her heartbeat struck his enhanced senses like a blow.

She arched toward him, though he knew she wasn't conscious of his company. Beneath the cover her thighs parted and he forcefully resisted the almost overwhelming desire to pull aside the satin sheet and make love to her himself.

* * *

LaCroix felt the second pull of desire that was near his captive, and he frowned thoughtfully. Someone was with her, but not touching her. His features dissolved into laughter moments later when he recognised the familiar presence. Nicholas was feeling the effects of his master's game as acutely as the pretty woman the ancient vampire toyed with presently did.

LaCroix intensified his control for another instant, felt an undeniable shudder rush through him at her lascivious response, then he snapped the dream bond abruptly.

* * *

Faith cried out loudly, her voice a sob of denial and frustration, then she jolted into wakefulness. Sweat filmed her body and she was gasping in air that didn't seem to fill her lungs quickly enough. The shock of cold air blowing in through the open french doors increased the discomfort she was feeling. It wasn't until the soft bang of the doors sliding shut penetrated her mind that she knew she wasn't alone in the room.

She sat up in the bed and hastily snatched the sheet and blankets to cover herself. She felt her body trembling and begging for the release her dream had promised. Her hand reached naturally for the gun that was under the second pillow.

"It's Nick."

She relaxed momentarily, then glared at him when he clicked on the small bedside lamp and sat next to her on the edge of the bed.

"What the hell are you doing in my hotel room, Knight?" She winced when she heard the breathless quiver that lingered in her voice.

"I was worried about you. You haven't answered any calls, and no one had seen you today," he explained, and looked closely at her. He hesitated, then decided to throw caution to the wind. "Do you remember your dream?"

Faith blushed scarlet at the surprise enquiry. What had he seen? Her body trembled at the merest hint of the dream's powerful sensuality. Pure raw sex, that's what her dream had been about. She sure as hell wasn't about to reveal that to Knight.

"Get out, Knight!" she snarled.

"Do you remember **who** you were with?" he pressed.

"Knight, I'm warning you -- "

"Was it the man you met last night?" he interrupted with a demand that stopped her cold and left her staring at him.

"Look, Nick, I don't know what you think ... " She drew in a deep breath and tried again. "You have no right."

"LaCroix's dangerous, Faith," Nick said gently. "He was here last night."

"No one was here last night!"

Nick held open his hand, and she stared mutely at the black queen in his palm. She knew at a glance where it should have been, where she'd seen it the previous night. And, she recalled vividly the imposing man who had shown her the exquisite chessboard.

"Was it LaCroix in your dream?"

Again, the question was softly spoken, but gently insistent.

"Nick, don't ... " She tried to turn away, but his hand on her cheek forced her to meet his candid gaze. "I don't know," she finally confessed. "I just know I've never felt anything like ... It's all vague, images and sensations, nothing clearer than that." She glared at him again when she realised how much she'd said. "I don't owe you explanations, Knight! Now why don't you do me a favour and leave?"

"Get dressed, we need to talk," Nick decreed without emotion.

His voice, dull and flat, struck her like a flood of ice water and she felt chilled all over again. "Mind if I take a shower?" she asked sweetly, sarcasm evident in every syllable.

Nick's smile reflected her tone. "Make it a cold one," he suggested. "But make it quick, I'm already late for shift."

"So go to work, Knight!" she snapped. "Go to hell, for all I care! Just get out of my bedroom!"

* * *

When Nick heard the shower running, he put in a call to the station and told Schanke he'd be in within the hour. Afterward, he paced the spacious living room of the suite and tried to reorder his chaotic thoughts. The queen in his hand drew his attention repeatedly. It had been left like a challenge, or a warning. He'd known LaCroix would resurface, he just hadn't anticipated it being within hours of their confrontation.

Why hadn't the master vampire killed Faith? It had been the question nagging at him since he'd discovered the chess piece. If she still lived, that left only one real answer -- the one he'd been avoiding. LaCroix would taunt him with Faith's life, until he decided to take her. Would Nick be able to stop his master?

LaCroix was seducing Faith slowly. That meant he intended to keep her with him, and wanted her allegiance to be willingly given. Nick had no doubt that she'd love the ancient by the time he took her, but as he always had, LaCroix would eventually use that love to destroy her.

It still left him with the quandary he'd started with -- how could he stop LaCroix? Especially when Faith would be fighting him every step of the way.

* * *

The water soothed as it streamed over her flushed skin. Faith leaned back against the slick tiles of the wall and her eyes closed as a sob rose in her throat. She recognised her mistake an instant too late. Unseen hands closed over her breasts, skimmed the smooth curves of her body, and roused her thwarted passion of earlier. The whisper of a kiss at her throat made her head fall back, and she bit her lip to suppress a moan when the feel of a gentle mouth covering first one ripe nipple then the other shot new waves of fierce desire through her entire body.

"No ... " It was a watery gasp of sound. She wasn't sure if it was a plea for the sensations to end, or not to be withdrawn a second time.

Her knees gradually gave way and she slid down the wall. The water continued its gentle cascade over her as she lay sprawled on the floor of the large shower stall. This time the invisible hands that made love to her didn't relent. She thrust urgently into the demanding touch, her body surrendering to its own

needs. She felt a hand between her thighs, expert fingers stroking and probing as she hovered on the edge of euphoria.

Seconds later, as exquisite pleasure sent her senses reeling, she saw his face. Crystal clear, achingly beautiful, dominated by eyes so blue she felt herself drowning ...

"Faith!"

Nick pulled her to her feet, and cut the flow of water in the shower. He bundled her up in a fluffy bathrobe and held her as she coughed and struggled to breathe again. The shaking that assailed her didn't diminish so he scooped her into his arms and carried her back into the bedroom. When he would have set her on the bed and withdrawn, she clung to him, and cried.

Nick held her for a long time before the sobs eased, then ceased entirely. A few more moments passed before she hesitantly drew away from him. Dazed brown eyes pleaded for an explanation he knew she was already afraid to hear. He smiled reassurance, then rose.

"I'm taking you someplace safe," he told her quietly.

Faith shook her head, the response mechanical, instinctive. She pushed damp tendrils of dark hair away from her face and met his sharp look evenly.

"I can take care of myself, Nick," she said with surprising, and welcome steadiness. "I've been doing precisely that for a number of years."

"You have no defenses against LaCroix," Knight informed her.

"LaCroix," she repeated. "What is with you and this guy? He's no different from any other man who's tried to --"

"He's a damn sight 'different' than anyone you've ever known, Faith," Nick interjected angrily. "I know him, you don't."

"So I'm supposed to be a good little girl and do as you tell me, is that it?" She realised as she said the words that she sounded like a complete fool, but he was pissing her off a great deal more than he should be. It didn't help that she'd been exposed to him both physically and emotionally as she had few other men. Faith didn't like feeling vulnerable, and she felt naked in all ways as she stared into Nick Knight's beautiful blue eyes.

"If you want to continue living, you'll do exactly as I ask," Nick replied with a solemn stare.

"No."

His gaze narrowed.

"Yes." Nick sat in front of her, held her gaze, and felt the attempt she made to look away. "You want to go with me, Faith," he murmured softly, weaving the hypnotic spell that would assure her cooperation. "You know I'm only trying to keep you safe. You want to go with me."

"Want to go with you," she repeated softly. Their eyes held each other for an eternity of moments before she wrenched free of the mesmerising intensity of Nick's stare. "Damn it, Knight! That's not fair."

Nick sighed heavily.

After a long hesitation, she dared to look at him again and relented when she read the sincere worry in his eyes.

"Okay, I'll go with you."

He was immediately wary.

She smiled.

"I mean it, if you think it's really necessary, I'll go."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid," she admitted with the direct candour that she'd met him with from the moment they'd been introduced in the squad room. There didn't seem much point to pretending with him anyway, considering their present circumstances and the tone of the evening so far. "Besides which, I want answers that I suspect only you can give me."

He ignored the undercurrent of subtle warning in the soft words. He knew she had no intention of allowing him to avoid her queries, and he was already concerned about how much he'd have to reveal to satisfy her understandable anxiety.

* * *

It didn't take long to gather together her belongings. She paid the bill and followed Nick as he headed for the Caddy. He tossed her small case in the trunk, and held the passenger door open for her.

"Chivalry is not dead after all," she remarked with a grin.

"Yeah, but don't expect me wear armour," Nick winked at her, slammed the door shut, and ran around to his side. Minutes later they were enroute to his apartment.

* * *

The call came over the radio less than five minutes after they'd left the hotel. Faith saw the indecision written so plainly on Nick's features and she bent to take the radio.

"What's your I.D.?"

"Eighty-one kilo," he answered with a shake of his head.

She was giving their location and their E.T.A. as he swung the car into a sharp turn.

* * *

LaCroix knew the moment she left the hotel. He smiled and continued to lull his enthralled audience, his voice spinning silk into the airwaves as he luxuriated in his own dark fantasy. 'The Night Crawler' ruled supreme, and soon, very soon, he would have a worthy consort to share his reign.

* * *

Schanke strolled over to the Caddy and grinned down at Faith. Nick had ordered her to stay in the car, and she was still furious with him. He was keeping his distance at the moment, talking to Natalie Lambert near the mouth of the alley that was the crime scene. She pulled her features into some semblance of a smile and returned Schanke's cheerful greeting.

"I thought you'd be winging your way back to L.A. by now," he commented as he leaned against Knight's car.

"I decided to stay for a few days," she laughed. "It's been about a decade since my last vacation, so I've designated Toronto as the hot-spot of choice."

Don's mouth opened to answer, but Captain Amanda Cohen's summons had him enroute to her side with only a shrug and a grimace cast in Faith's direction. A few minutes later the vehicles at the scene were moving out, and Nick had rejoined her.

* * *

"Won't you be needed at the station?" she questioned once she saw they were again headed in the direction of his apartment.

"I told Schanke I'd be in as soon as you were settled in a new hotel," he smiled.

"Oh?"

"Natalie's going to stop by later," he added.

"Natalie? Why, for God's sake? I'm more than capable of spending a few hours alone, Knight. Not that I'm as convinced of this plan as I was earlier." She'd been having serious doubts about the entire situation ever since they'd left the hotel.

His response, if he had intended to make one, was forgotten as the sound of a gunshot whistled in the night air. Nick felt the Caddy swerve crazily as the left front tire was blown. He managed to bring the car to a halt near the curb, then he and Faith were on the sidewalk and running. He pushed her toward a partially concealed doorway, and spun to locate the shooter. Another shot shattered the relative quiet. He felt the bullet pass through him, then heard a strangled cry of pain and shock behind him.

Instinct took over. His fangs extruded and he was on the other side of the street instantly. A flurry of running feet told him which direction his quarry had taken, and he winced as a second bullet entered his body. He would have pursued the assailant, but the twinge of pain reminded him of a more pressing emergency. Snarling with impotent fury, Nick knew he had to lose the shooter(s), or possibly lose Faith. He had no way

of knowing how badly injured she was, and he wasn't foolish enough to not believe she had been the one hit by the bullet that had gone through him.

* * *

"Are you crazy, Nick?" Natalie gasped when he placed the unconscious woman on one of the lab gurneys. "She needs to go to a hospital, not a morgue. In case you haven't noticed, she's still breathing! None of the other patients are."

"She wouldn't be safe at a hospital, Nat," he told her urgently. "Do what you can, then we'll move her to my apartment."

"Nick!" She took a good look at his face, recognised the familiar stubborn set, and relented without a fight. "Fine."

"I don't think it's serious," he told her as she worked. After a good look at the wound, a deep graze located just above the waist on the right side, Natalie concurred.

"What happened?"

"Drive-by shooting," Nick told her. "Schanke's checking into it now. No one knows she was hit."

"How'd you manage that?" Natalie began, then shook her head and grinned. "Never mind, I probably don't want to know."

Nick smiled in agreement.

* * *

LaCroix's face clouded with annoyance when he read the news report that had come into the radio station. The two incidents were probably linked; the death in the alley, and the attempt on Nick's life only a couple of miles away from the crime scene. He was mulling over the implications when the call was transferred to his private line.

An unknown witness, one of LaCroix's, had spotted gang colours. The area of the city would have told LaCroix who the would-be assassins were, but his informant supplied the name without hesitation. It was the final piece of news that escalated the ancient vampire's concern to irrational and sudden rage.

When he calmed the initial spurt of fury, he wanted to see her. To discover if his response was born of fantasy, or if she truly was as appealing as he believed her to be. His attachment bordered on human infatuation, and LaCroix would not tolerate humanity, especially in himself.

* * *

"She's going to need rest, Nick," Natalie said as they settled Faith into Knight's bed. The lovely coroner tried not to resent the attentiveness in Nick's manner as he settled the injured officer more comfortably, then kissed her forehead.

"You guys got pretty close during the investigation," Natalie murmured before she could stifle the words. She groaned inwardly, cursed herself for the jealousy she knew he'd read into the statement. How could he see anything else when she couldn't deny it to her own conscience. He didn't seem to hear her, and she complied gratefully when he took her by the elbow and led her from the room.

"I'm worried, Natalie," Nick answered once they were back in his living room. "LaCroix wants her."

"LaCroix?" Natalie understood his apprehension. She knew that she'd met the master vampire once, though the memory was hazy. Still, the lingering terror his name invoked was anything but vague and indistinct.

"It's a long story, Natalie. That's why she has to stay here. In a hospital, he'd find her in a matter of hours."

"And you think he won't look here?" She sounded astonished at his lack of logic. "If he knows she's a friend of yours, this will be the first place he checks when she disappears."

"No one knows she was hurt. He'll assume she went back to Los Angeles," Nick said. He wanted to believe it would be that simple. "Maybe he'll leave to find her?" he added with false optimism.

"You wish!" Natalie thought sardonically. She said nothing.

The phone ringing averted the need for a reply, and she gazed up toward the bedroom as Nick crossed to answer the call.

"Schanke's got a lead on the shooters," Nick told her minutes later as he hauled on his coat and headed for the door. "Stay with her until I get back."

He was gone before she could object or acquiesce.

* * *

Natalie's heart rose to her throat when she looked up from the novel she'd been reading. The book slid from suddenly lifeless hands and she stared into dazzling blue eyes as icy terror flooded her veins.

"Natalie," LaCroix murmured softly, his tone alluring and seductive. "Lovely as always," he added as he took one of her hands and raised it briefly to his lips.

"Nick's not here," she whispered, annoyed when her voice shook.

He smiled.

"It's not Nicholas I wish to see," he told her quietly.

Natalie knew exactly who he wanted to see, and wondered how she was supposed to stop him from going upstairs. It was a moot point moments later. LaCroix's blue eyes flickered in her vision, drew her inward, overwhelmed her will. Every part of her wanted to resist, but she fell effortlessly into the peaceful darkness of unconsciousness.

* * *

LaCroix caught her as she fell and placed her back on the leather sofa. He didn't spare her further attention as the sound of a second heartbeat told him where he'd find Faith Prescott.

He entered Nick's bedroom and stood for a few moments at the foot of the bed. Faith slept, deeply and without dreams. There was a sense of pain lurking beneath the balm of drugs. It was that twinge of awareness that led him to her side. He sat on the edge of the mattress and pulled aside the blankets. His breath escaped in a hiss of relief seconds later when he saw that the injury was a minor one.

Faith whispered softly, still asleep, and LaCroix smiled as he discerned his name on her lips, his image within her mind. His nearness had cleared some of the fog from her thoughts. The knowledge should not have pleased him as much as it did, and he was again forced to search his responses.

* * *

Faith knew he was beside her before she opened her eyes to confirm it. His presence was unmistakable. Excitement knotted her stomach, and with it came fear. Her recollections of LaCroix were a distortion of images that refused to be made clear. Fangs and glowing eyes accompanied the sensations of unbearable longing, and urgent lust.

Dark eyes finally opened fully and she smiled when she saw him, the response natural in spite of her trepidation. He said nothing and she sighed breathlessly when long fingers smoothed over her forehead, down the curve of her cheek, and came to rest at the pulse that fluttered at the base of her neck.

"Those responsible for your injury will be dealt with, Faith," LaCroix promised.

When she would have answered, he silenced her with a tender kiss. She responded instantly, her mouth softened beneath his and she invited a more intimate caress. When he began to draw away, she gasped in denial, and he laughed before indulging her. His lips covered hers a second time, and his tongue met the restless thrust of hers as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

The second time he pulled away from her, she didn't attempt to prevent his departure. He smiled down at her, kissed her forehead, then stood.

"We'll be together, Faith. As soon as I've finished what needs to be done."

She nodded, completely entranced, adoration shone in her eyes as she watched him leave.

* * *

Natalie shook herself back to awareness with a muffled curse. LaCroix's face loomed within her mind's eye, and she felt a moment of pure panic when she recalled how easily she'd fallen under his hypnotic spell. A glance at her watch told her she'd been out for less than an hour. That calculation wasn't important, she berated herself as she climbed to her feet and took a step toward the stairs. How long did it take a vampire to kill someone? Certainly not an hour!

Her legs didn't want to support her and she fell. The sudden jolt sent her shaken senses reeling and blackness engulfed her a second time.

* * *

Faith heard the low thud that drifted up from the lower floor of the loft. It was then that she remembered Natalie Lambert was in the apartment. It was blurry, but the coroner was there, she was certain of it. Had LaCroix hurt Natalie? Her heart rejected the thought. Her mind assured her it was a real possibility. Logic won, and Faith tried to leave the bed.

Pain arced through her, and she gasped loudly. She managed to get to her feet and promptly collapsed for the exertion. She moaned in agony as blistering lances of fire shot upward from her side. She was afraid to move, and more afraid not to. When she went down the second time minutes later, at the top of the stairs, she passed out.

* * *

LaCroix stood near the rear entrance to the abandoned store-front that acted as headquarters to the group he was hunting. His vampiric senses caught the throb of collective heartbeats, and the scent of warm blood beckoned and inflamed his heightened emotions. These mortal children had dared to injure LaCroix's chosen prize, and they were about to learn what the price of their blunder would be.

Soundlessly, he stepped into the lair.

There were five young men in the gloomy area, several were drinking, one kept a half-hearted watch, and the final member was in the darkest corner, screwing a girl who was more oblivious to than interested in what was going on.

For a minute, time stood still. They stared at the vampire in undisguised disbelief. LaCroix allowed them their moment of shock, and smiled. The change in his expression seemed to galvanise them into a frenzy of motion.

One of the three who drank tossed aside his beer, quickly pulled a gun, and fired. LaCroix didn't flinch as the bullet tore through his chest. He smiled again, this time revealing gleaming fangs. He was immune to the choked screams of terror as his eyes fastened on the boy who'd shot at him. The vampire was a blur of motion. LaCroix seized the youth and smoothly snapped his neck, then the vampire's fangs descended. Seconds later he tossed aside the drained body.

They were scrambling to reach the exit, pushing at each other in their mad rush to escape. LaCroix roared his fury, and chose his next victim. Faith's face swam before him, still with death. The second boy's throat was ravaged and his corpse flung away. Blood-lust and growing rage drowned all traces of reason within the ancient vampire's mind, and he smiled as he launched at the remaining punks.

It was over in minutes, and six blood stained bodies littered the dusty floor. The violence of his kills had increased with the flow of blood that he'd gorged on. The evidence of his brutality was apparent in the gaping wounds and grotesquely rended bodies. LaCroix closed his eyes briefly, then flew from the building.

* * *

The kills were nothing.

But, the loss of control as LaCroix had gone through the gang members to avenge Faith was something he wasn't able to dismiss as easily. LaCroix never lost control of his reason. He took lives without guilt, but never in an insane rage as he'd done tonight. The realisation that he'd felt, deeply, the fear of losing a mortal woman, enraged and unsettled him.

* * *

"Nothing!" Schanke snapped as he came to a stop in front of his partner. He reholstered his gun and waited for some sort of rebuke from Knight. When it wasn't forthcoming, he eyed the blond man with something akin to apprehension.

"Out with it, Knight," he said impatiently. "We just got a false lead, from one of my -- "

"Forget it, Schank," Nick interrupted softly. "It happens."

Schanke waited, still not willing to accept that Knight was being so amiable about the screw-up.

"What now?"

"We find your informer and ask him where he got his information." Nick had the distinct feeling he already knew, but he needed to be certain. Schanke sighed, and refrained from comment as he climbed into the Caddy. Nick flipped open his cellular and called the loft.

"How's Faith?" Schanke asked innocently once Nick had placed his call. When Knight glanced at him, he smiled. "She was as white as a ghost when you guys headed for 'the hotel', and she was barely conscious. I don't know why you didn't want anyone to know she was hit, and I don't want to know. It's your business. But have you contacted her captain yet?"

"No," Nick answered the second question, then debated his reply to the first. "She's fine, it was a flesh wound. I haven't notified her captain, because Natalie figures she'll be all right in a few days. Someone's after her, Schank. That's why she's not in a hospital."

"You think this might be connected to -- "

Nick shook his head immediately. "It's personal, nothing to do with the case."

Schanke wanted to ask the obvious, but chose not to. He knew it was the right decision moments later when Knight relaxed visibly. In spite of the teasing he'd tossed at Nick, he knew that the Los Angeles detective and his partner had become friends. Knight didn't have many people in his life, at least to Schanke's reckoning, so he was glad they'd found some common emotional ground. Faith Prescott seemed as difficult to get near as Nick often appeared.

"Where do we find ... "

"Terence," Schanke supplied. "Check 'The Underground' first."

"Appropriate," Nick mumbled as he turned the Caddy into traffic.

* * *

The scent of fresh blood was everywhere, and Nick reeled against the impact it was having on his senses. Six bodies all but ripped to pieces, and he knew who was responsible. The amount of blood was minimal, the violence of the deaths sickening. LaCroix had sought vengeance ... Somehow, the master vampire had known these kids were the ones who'd attacked Nick and Faith. That wasn't surprising, Schanke's snitch had been given his misleading information by someone matching the description of LaCroix's sound technician from CERK Radio. The delay tactic had given LaCroix time to unleash his revenge.

"Steady, Nick," Schanke said quietly as he stopped beside his partner. "You look like you're -- "

Nick waved aside the half-finished observation.

"Has Natalie been notified?" he asked.

"She's not answering her beeper, one of her assistants is on his way over."

"Can you handle things here, Schanke?" Nick questioned with sudden urgency. Natalie was at his apartment, not answering her calls, and LaCroix would go there in search of Faith. He should never have left them there, not alone.

Schanke's outraged voice followed him as he left the building at a run, turned into the dark alley next to the store, and quickly rose in flight.

* * *

Minutes later, Nick burst into his loft, descending through the skylight. He spotted Natalie immediately and dropped to his knees next to her.

"Nat!" She was breathing normally, and showed no signs of being attacked. He recognised the aftereffects of trance when her eyes opened and closed several times in an attempt to focus.

"It's all right, Nat," he reassured as he carried her to the sofa. "You're safe."

"LaCroix was here," she gasped and gestured vaguely toward the stairs. "Faith ... " It wasn't necessary to continue speaking, he was already gone. She waited a few minutes more before she felt secure enough to move again.

* * *

Faith was hauling herself into a sitting position when Nick reached her side. She smiled wanly and didn't object when he picked her up and took her back into his bedroom. When he began checking her throat for marks, she pushed him away.

"Have you lost your mind, Knight?" she demanded weakly.

Knight ignored her as he contemplated the evidence that LaCroix had let pass his second opportunity to take her. What kind of game was the older vampire playing?

"What did he say to you?" Nick asked as she glared at him.

"What did who say to me?"

Knight's eyes darkened with warning. "LaCroix," he stated blandly. "And don't tell me he wasn't here."

The challenge hung in the air for several tension laden moments, then she closed her fingers into fists and shook her head.

"I wish he'd taken me with him," she hissed.

Nick's expression was bleak.

"Did you find the shooters?"

It was Natalie who asked the question as she joined them in the bedroom. She held up a hand when Nick would have admonished her for moving.

"I'm fine, Nick, really," she told him with a small smile. "Just a little groggy."

"He said they'd be dealt with," Faith supplied into the warmth that arced between the two friends.

"What?"

She smiled at Nick's anger.

"You heard me, Knight."

"He killed six people, Faith," Nick told her coldly. "He no doubt enjoyed it tremendously."

She felt ice flow along her spine and shook her head. "I don't believe you."

"Why? You don't know anything about LaCroix. He's a monster, Faith. A killer. And he intends to make you into one." Nick made no effort to soften the shattering disclosures, and his voice was carefully devoid of emotion.

"That's ridiculous," she protested, though her confidence was clearly shaken. When she caught the look of concern that passed between Nick and Natalie, her temper flared. "You're the one who doesn't understand, Knight. You have no idea what he feels!"

Nick stared at her, more worry than disbelief in his handsome features.

"I know exactly how he feels, Faith," Nick whispered sadly, then added very softly, "Because I'm just like him." Dark eyes snapped with unvented rage, then she looked away from his direct gaze.

* * *

Natalie watched as Nick paced and waited for Janette to arrive. She wasn't convinced calling the beautiful vampire would win him any support, but she wasn't in a position to offer him anything useful in the way of help herself, so she conceded to the inevitable. Nick always went to Janette when he was in trouble, it was something Natalie was slowly learning to accept.

She almost jumped out of her skin when Janette slipped in through the skylight and landed next to her. The lovely vampire smiled in amused greeting, then went to Nick's side.

"This had better be important, Nickola," she said after kissing him thoroughly. She laughed at the sheepish glance he cast in Natalie's direction. "Relax, chéri," she purred, "Natalie understands that we are old friends. Don't you, Natalie?" she grinned at the other woman.

Natalie offered them a weak smile, then went into the kitchen to make herself another cup of coffee.

* * *

"What is it you want from me this time, Nick?" Janette asked once they were alone.

"Your support," he answered, then finished with obvious reluctance, "against LaCroix."

"Non!" It came without hesitation and she glared at him in fury. "There is a great deal I would do to help you, Nickola, but I will not get involved in your war with LaCroix."

"He wants the woman he met at your club," Nick stated. "She's a friend, Janette."

"She is your friend, Nick. Not mine. I will not risk it! Do you have any idea what he would do to me if I helped you keep this woman away from him? Let him have her, Nick. This time, let him **have** the woman he wants," she repeated with obvious meaning. "Faith Prescott is not your sister."

"He's killed a half dozen people tonight, Janette," Nick almost shouted in combined anger and hurt. The reminder of Fleur was a painful one, and he resented Janette for it.

"All the more reason to let him have the woman," Janette concluded. "If she is the reason he has gone on this killing spree, then she will also be the reason he stops."

"And what if he doesn't?" Nick charged. "Do you think we can survive the attention this could bring to the community?"

Her expression clouded again with annoyance.

"Then return her to her home, Nickola," Janette advised. "But, let it go."

"He'll follow her," Nick insisted.

"Let him," she said softly. She sighed heavily, then went to his side. "Nickola, this war you wage with LaCroix will end in disaster if you continue to provoke him. He's powerful, no one knows that better than we do, and he will have what he wants."

"Help me, Janette," he requested again. When she would have whirled away in anger, he pulled her close. "Please, Janette, this is important to me."

Eventually, she relented.

* * *

"You'll be safe here," Nick told Faith as he looked around the spacious apartment Janette had sent them to. Natalie finished checking the bandages on Faith's side, and helped her sit up again.

"I'd be just as safe on my way back to L.A., Nick," she said for what felt like the tenth time in the past hour.

"As soon as Nat says you can travel," he promised, though he refused to meet her eyes as he spoke.

"Or as soon as you kill LaCroix, is that it, Knight?" Faith enquired with genuine resentment. "Why won't you explain whatever it is that's going on between you?"

Natalie met his eyes and Faith bristled at the obvious knowledge they shared.

"If you want me to disappear, Nick, you'd better be prepared to tell me why I'm leaving," she interjected firmly.

"He intends to kill you."

To Faith's astonishment it was Natalie, not Nick, who made the surprising announcement. It was followed quickly by a curt, "She deserves to know, Nick!"

For long minutes, silence filled the room, then Nick nodded and came to join them on the couch. He took Faith's hands in his, and began to tell her precisely what LaCroix was, and what he wanted from her.

* * *

Janette stormed into the back room of The Raven, drink in hand. She was tired, and more than a little annoyed with the two men who had dominated her life for centuries. At that moment, she would have gladly rid herself of both of them.

She drained her glass and peered into the crimson-filmed bowl of the goblet. Calm slowly penetrated her mood, and she walked the room as the tranquility of her now-quiet nightclub made its way into her mind.

Her tour of the room ended at the chess table, and her fragile peace shattered and became an enraged growl of renewed fury. She ran her fingers over the white queen, then picked up the ornately carved playing piece. Finding the queen on her side was not an accident, it was a caution against further interference. Janette knew she would heed LaCroix's warning.

She clutched the piece tightly, then flung it across the room as impotent rage coursed through her veins.

"Damn you both!" she shouted to the empty room.

* * *

"What have we got on the multiple homicides at that store-front?" Captain Cohen asked as she came to a halt next to Knight's desk.

"Natalie's doing the autopsies," he began, suppressing a twinge of anxiety at the enquiry.

"And what have you turned up?" Cohen repeated with more insistence.

"One of the guns at the crime scene matches the ballistics in the shooting earlier in the night," Nick told her. "Looks like one solved, even if the motive isn't clear."

"And suspects for the massacre?" she asked with an inflection of obvious revulsion in her tone.

"None," Schanke put in as he dropped into his chair and tossed the file he was carrying onto Nick's desk. "And Natalie hasn't been able to determine exact cause of death, the wounds are inconsistent. She said something about blood losses and the possibility of shock induced trauma that led to death." He shrugged. "None of it makes much sense, and there were no prints at the scene -- another mystery. Naturally, no one saw anything out of the ordinary." He looked from his partner's carefully neutral expression to the annoyance on Cohen's face, and wasn't reassured by either.

"Find something, gentlemen," Cohen advised. "We have six dead bodies on our hands, and I need to have something better than 'we're looking into it' to give to the police commissioner when he calls again to yell on the mayor's behalf."

Before either detective could reply, she was slamming the door to her office.

"Great!" Schanke muttered. "How are we supposed to find something when there isn't anything to be found?"

Figuring it was rhetorical, Knight didn't bother attempting an answer of any kind. He had other things on his mind just then, though the two were directly connected in a sense. It had been two days since the attack Cohen referred to, and in that time, LaCroix had made no move toward Faith Prescott. Nick was certain it was simply a move to keep him off guard.

It was working.

* * *

Faith twisted the dials on the sound system in her temporary residence. She'd been up for most of the day, and was weary with emotional strain as well as physical. She was about to turn off the radio when his voice froze her hand in mid-air. With a sharp exhalation, she slumped into an armchair and listened in shocked wonder ...

* * *

"... Vulnerability comes with caring, boys and girls ... You let someone touch you and you give them the greatest weapon they could hope to have ... No one's immune ... No one's ever really good at being alone ... It's a sickness ... loneliness ... and it eats away at your soul ... It's insidious ... It makes you weak, boys and girls ..."

LaCroix's expression was grim as the words spilled out into the night, carried to an audience who had no true understanding of what it was he spoke about. No mortal could, of course. LaCroix's isolation was the product of millennia spent alone, in a search that had promised him an end to the ache within him, but always denied him the prize he sought.

He thought he'd found a worthy companion in Faith Prescott, but his lack of control had dissuaded him in a way Nicholas would never have been capable of employing.

* * *

Faith shivered as the sound of his voice seduced her. The response was so intense she felt tears slip from her eyes, and was shocked to realise she was breathing erratically and her heart was pounding wildly. Impulsively, she rose and headed for the bedroom. Minutes later she was dressed and gone from the apartment.

* * *

Nick snapped the phone shut and headed directly for the apartment house. She should have answered the phone, he'd been trying to get through to her for nearly an hour. Dread had settled in the pit of his stomach, cold and tightly coiled into a knot that felt tangible.

* * *

LaCroix knew the moment he was no longer alone in the studio. He glanced up from his solitary seat in the centre of the shadowed room. Beyond the glass walls that enclosed him, he saw her. Dark hair was wind blown, and her eyes bright with yearning. He smiled and invited her in with a careless gesture of one hand. He leaned back in his chair and watched as she crossed the short distance that separated them, then stood before him.

"What do you want, Faith?" he eventually asked.

"I heard your ... " She stopped, drew in a ragged breath, and held out her hands, palms upturned. "I want to be with you, Lucien," she admitted in a rush. "I've wanted to be with you since that night at The Raven."

"Nicholas saved your life that night," LaCroix informed her. When she didn't comment, he looked more closely at her. "And he's told you a great deal since then," the master vampire concluded.

"It doesn't change how I feel," she assured him.

One eloquently arched eyebrow rose, his smile was indulgent, and not a little mocking.

"Go, while you have the chance, Faith," he decreed coldly, voice devoid of any discernible emotion.

* * *

Nick flung the apartment door open and raced through the rooms in search of Faith. She was gone. He stood in the living room, and for a minute it didn't register. Slowly, he heard the low sound of a familiar voice. The radio was still on, soft and insistent, pouring out a spell of dark seduction to an unsuspecting audience. And one mind in particular would find the lure an irresistible force.

As quickly as he'd entered the apartment, Nick abandoned it.

* * *

Faith stared at LaCroix in confused horror. "No!" She walked around the console that separated them and knelt next to his chair. "Don't send me away," she pleaded, beyond caring what a fool she was making of herself. "I'm tired of being alone too."

"You can't begin to know -- "

"She can, that's why you wanted her, LaCroix."

"Nicholas," the vampire purred. "I was wondering how long it would take you to get here?"

It wasn't the reaction he'd been anticipating. Faith's rapt gaze was fixed on LaCroix, and Nick felt her anguish like a physical presence in the hushed studio.

"Take her, Nicholas," LaCroix offered. "I have no desire to acquire slaving idiots, regardless of how tempting they may have briefly been."

Faith stumbled to her feet, staggered back in her effort to place distance between them as she gaped in humiliated outrage.

"You said you wanted me," she sputtered, unable to stop the words as much as she wanted to. "You said we'd be together."

LaCroix ignored her, refused to even glance in her direction as she tossed aside the last shreds of her dignity. The genuine pain he felt at her anguish was all the reminder required to reaffirm his resolve. In that moment he hated her, because he did desire her.

"Get her out of here, Nicholas, before I tear out her throat just to be free of her whining."

Nicholas recognised the lie in his master's eyes, and it puzzled him. LaCroix wanted her. Faith had offered herself to the vampire, and he had just driven her away. He heard her sobs begin, softly at first, then more deeply as the scope of her turmoil expanded. He went to her and pulled her into his arms.

Nick kept his hold firm as he led her to the door, and he risked a single look back at LaCroix. The master vampire stared at them, his expression unreadable. Knight knew in that instant what had caused the sudden change of heart. Faith made LaCroix vulnerable, touched the humanity that lay within his ancient heart and weakened his contemptuous view of mortal life. She'd been the reason for a loss of control LaCroix would not permit a second time.

"Time is infinite, Nicholas. I can wait, and she **will** come to me when I do want her, dear boy."

Without a word, Nick took her from the radio station.

* * *

LaCroix picked up the dark queen that had been cloaked in the dark shadow of the sound board. His thumb caressed the smooth, carved ebony before his fist closed over the piece and hid her from his view. After several seconds, LaCroix dropped the figure into his pocket, and flicked a switch on the console. He leaned toward the microphone, and spoke her name ... Promised her eternity ...

* * *

Faith watched the waves crash down on the deserted beach. It was just after sunset, and a slight chill permeated the air after the day's heat. She'd been home almost a week, but her dreams were haunted by Toronto, and all that had happened there. She was safe, and her injury was healing nicely, yet something inside her had changed irrevocably. Her body ached with a need she couldn't define, and she wasn't able to escape the longing even in sleep.

She climbed to her feet and strolled the sandy stretch of beach that would take her back to her home. The breeze wrapped her in a blanket of loneliness and the yearning that dominated her world so often of late dragged her into despair again. A face hovered on the fringes of her mind, but remained elusive. She knew if she could recall the image that wanted to surface, she would no longer have to search for an end to her pain. She'd find it in his eyes.

If only she could remember ...

* * *

LaCroix twirled the glass between his fingers and watched Janette as she tried to feign indifference to his presence. She'd been nervous of him since she'd helped Nicholas. She had no way of knowing that he was grateful now for her intervention. It had given him the space of time he needed to clear his thoughts.

So why was he so preoccupied with the memory of a dark haired, sad-eyed mortal who had all but begged for death at his hands? He laughed bitterly. In spite of her youth, he knew Faith Prescott would have understood him as few others had. For that knowledge, he had driven her from him, because Nicholas would have found a way to poison her devotion. The knight had claimed her in friendship, and LaCroix knew Nick would never let go of that loyalty.

One day, very soon, Nicholas would have to finally learn the price of his repeated betrayals of LaCroix.

Janette stirred restlessly, her eyes wary as she felt the shifts of his mood. He drained the glass and set it carefully on the bar-top. A cool smile crossed his features and she took a step toward him. LaCroix turned his back to her and left the club without a word.

* * *

Nick sat in front of the huge screen and filled his mind with the image of the forbidden sunrise. It had been an extremely long night. The deaths LaCroix's rage had caused were officially filed as "unsolved", and Cohen's anger at the necessity had been vocal and stinging.

He thought about Faith, and the repression of her memory. It had taken both his influence and Janette's to take LaCroix's image from her mind, and he still wasn't sure they'd been completely successful. She'd formed a deep bond with their master, and the honesty of her caring for LaCroix had come as something of a surprise to them. It had also made their task all the more difficult to accomplish.

LaCroix was out there, and Nick knew he now had yet another reason to fear his vampire father. He couldn't help but wonder if he'd been wrong to keep Faith from LaCroix ... His thoughts drifted to Natalie. His love for the pretty coroner offered him hope. And, since finding her, some of his isolation had eased. Did he have the right to deny LaCroix the same comfort?

Faith had awakened a whisper of humanity in the ancient vampire, and Nick had destroyed it once again. He shuddered, suddenly chilled to the core of his being. LaCroix would bury that hint of perceived weakness, and when it was thoroughly extinguished he **would** seek his reprisal ...

THE VAMPYRE'S KISS by Denyse M. Bridger

image
a flicker of white breaks the colourless
night
glimmer
flashes of blinding silver radiance
rapid
gone so quickly i am left gasping, breathless
wonder
the air moves around me, caresses flushed
skin
shudders
ripple my spine promises unspoken, imagined
kiss
death has touched my lips, awakened life
possession
an eruption of fire within the bleakness
chill
the shadow retreats, gone on the breeze
alone
soul claimed and returned
nothing
has changed

POINT OF VIEW

by Jeanne McClure and Denyse Bridger

"You and my pop been goin' out lately?"

Mary Margaret glanced up from her drowsy slouch in the passenger seat of the unmarked sedan and studied her partner's sharp profile. "What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded, her voice sounding hoarse and irritated.

"Nothin'," Peter Caine said with a shrug and pure innocence imprinted clearly on his young face. He couldn't quite hide the smile that tugged at his mouth. "I was just making small talk. You said yourself that it's important to make small talk on a stakeout to pass the time. I just didn't want you to be bored."

With a huff of air, Mary Margaret sat up straight in the seat, trying to avoid waking up the kinks lurking in her back. She took a second to scan the street -- again -- before turning her attention back to Peter. "You know as well as I do that we only went out that one time," she said after finding the street exactly as it had been the last time she'd looked -- empty and black.

This was one of the few sparsely populated areas of Chinatown near the docks, but not near enough to be a center of any kind of activity except the one they were engaged in tonight. Drug trafficking was a business of choice in the darkness-shrouded alleyways of this part of the city, and a buy had been set up a full three days ago through Peter's street connections. Mary Margaret had been leery of taking the bait, but Peter had watched one too many Chinatown kids die in the throes of painful overdoses from poorly cut drugs. It was either make the meet with him or risk his going alone, and she had no intention of ID'ing his body in the morgue. So here they sat, waiting for a connection that had, so far, failed to show up. And if nothing happened tonight, they were even further behind in putting an end to what had started out as a simple tainted-drug situation, and was rapidly escalating into an all-out drug war between rival factions.

Peter's attempt at cynicism -- half the bodies falling were the dealers and suppliers, almost a heaping hand to the PD -- had fallen flat when Skalany pointed out to him that the other half were users, some no more than children. That had been the only time in the months she'd known the volatile young detective that she'd actually managed to shut him up. *So much for tough, cynical cops*, she thought with a trace of a smile.

"Did you want it to be more?" This time Peter was watching her more closely, and his lopsided grin had vanished.

"Peter, you take care of your love life, and I'll oversee mine, okay?"

"Skalany, you have no sense of humor."

"I've been riding with you for four months, *Tomato Can*," she retorted lightly. "That would sober anyone up. Just ask Epstein."

"Jeez, you're in a mood lately."

"Our schedules didn't mesh, okay?"

It took Peter a second to realize they were back to the original topic, and he grinned. "Yeah, priesthood sure can get in the way of dating."

"I mean it, Caine; you keep it up and the bad guys aren't going to have to do you in 'cause I'll -- hey!"

"What?" Peter followed her line of sight, but all he saw was an empty, poorly lit street.

"I saw somebody. There. In the mouth of the alley."

"I don't see anything."

"There!" her voice had dropped to a hissed whisper.

Peter caught the flicker of shadow within deeper shadow, a wisp of movement that could be anything... or nothing.

"I'll check it out," he said, tugging his pistol out of its belt holster and reaching for the door.

Mary Margaret's hand on his arm stopped him. "I don't think you'd better go in there alone, Peter." Instant protest flashed into his dark eyes, and she beat him to the threatened argument. "I mean it,

Peter. These guys aren't amateurs. I don't want to have to explain your bullet-riddled body to either one of your fathers."

Peter grinned at the image of this feisty, dark-haired woman squaring off against the police captain and the Shaolin priest, and he patted her hand absently. "I'll be okay. It's probably a cat. Besides, somebody's got to stay with the car in case something does go down to call for back up."

"Peter--"

He had slipped out of the car even before she completed his name, and she huffed out her frustration. Trying to control Peter Caine had somehow become a full-time job lately. And it usually ended up just exactly as it was happening now: he'd out-talked any objections and simply went on doing whatever he'd intended to do in the first place. More often than not, she'd seen him out-manuever his foster father and the chief, and she'd vowed that it wouldn't happen with her. But there he was, sneaking along the dark sidewalk toward the alley, doubled over to minimize himself as a potential target, and here she was, sitting in the car where he considered her "safe". *Male chauvinist pig*, she grouse silently.

It was to be her last thought.

Mary Margaret never heard the bullet that pinged a neat hole in the driver's side window and ripped through the back of her head. She didn't see Peter whirl out of his crouch and turn back to the car. Nor did she hear the agony and fear-laced scream of "No!" when he saw, even through the murky blackness of night, the splatter of her blood smearing the passenger side window.

She would never again have to worry about her young partner's safety.

* * * * *

There couldn't have been more confusion at the One Hundred First if someone had dropped a bomb in the middle of the squad room.

Phones rang off the hook including, amazingly, calls from Washington, D.C. Reporters demanded information that was simply not forthcoming. Reports were filed, retrieved, corrected, and refiled with a speed never experienced before in the precinct archives. Interdepartmental concerns warred with political ramifications, and there was a very real, very lethal tug-of-war already in progress over the hotly contested prisoner in the single solitary confinement cell downstairs.

Paul Blaisdell side-stepped questions and demands alike on the way back to his office, stopping only long enough to respond to his chief of detective's "come here" gesture.

"I've sent someone to pick up his father," Frank Strenlich said in a near-whisper.

"Good." Paul gave a brusque nod that Strenlich accepted as a preoccupied thanks. "Any more threats of extradition on the horizon?"

"Yeah, we're getting demands on a minute-by-minute basis," Frank answered with a twist to his mouth that said he was trying to digest something sour. "This dame thing isn't just national, Paul; it's international. We've even got Washington breathing down our necks. I don't know what the hell Caine and Skalany stumbled into, but it's a mess."

"We got any chance of holding out?"

"Snowball's chance in El Paso, maybe," Frank said with a shrug that only underlined his feeling of helplessness.

"One of our people is dead," Blaisdell retorted, misplaced anger making it sound like a charge he was levying personally on the chief.

Frank sloughed it off. "Tell that to the Feds."

"I will. Let me know when his father gets here."

Strenlich nodded and watched as Blaisdell headed on toward his shuttered office.

Paul hesitated at the door. Peter hadn't moved in the fifteen minutes that Blaisdell had been tied up outside fielding calls and demands. He was slumped over in the chair, elbows on his knees, his face cradled in his hands. Blood stained the front of his shirt, the scarlet a grotesque contrast to the baby blue of the material. The paramedics had been forced to wrestle Mary Margaret's lifeless body away from him. Paul had arrived in time to witness the struggle and talk Peter into releasing her. He wasn't surprised when Peter refused to do to the hospital; he'd simply brought him back here and tried to keep both Internal Affairs and the press away from him.

Peter should have been ranting and raving, not sitting still and silent in the office. He should have been a whirlwind of anger and rage at the senseless death of his partner and friend. Instead, he had mouthed monosyllabic answers to direct, and often repeated, questions, each word forced out of him.

Paul had yet to find out how he had managed to wound and capture the man who was now the center of attention in the holding cell. From the look of his foster son, it would be a while before anyone knew exactly what had happened. Paul only hoped he could keep the vultures at bay long enough for Peter to recover sufficiently to get the story out.

With a creak of protesting muscles and joints, Paul squatted down before the chair and tugged Peter's hands away from his face, placing the cup of coffee into them. He made sure the cup was held securely before he let go.

"Drink some of this," he said gently.

Blank eyes glanced up at him, the vacant stare more unsettling than the smeared blood all over his clothing. Paul tipped the cup up, forcing some of the lukewarm liquid into him. It was swallow or choke, and Peter choked. Paul waited out the coughing fit, pounded a few useless flat-handed blows to Peter's back, then tried again with the coffee. This time, Peter elected to swallow. When half the cup was gone, there was finally some recognition in his eyes when he looked back up at Paul.

"You have to tell me what happened," Blaisdell said, trying unsuccessfully to put some authority into his voice. He was supposed to be handling this as a police captain instead, he found himself being nothing more than a concerned father. All he wanted to do was put his arms around his foster son, lead him out through the jungle of activity in the squad room and make it all go away. Allow Peter time to digest what had happened, time to grieve for a woman who was more than a partner to him. Peter took his friendships seriously more than that, he accepted guilt where he shouldn't. Paul was well aware that the foremost emotion the young cop was suppressing was an overwhelming guilt that Mary Margaret Skalary had died in the line of duty while she was his partner. Peter Caine was supposed to be badder than the baddest bad guys. He was supposed to single-handedly prevent unfairness and cruelty in the world. And if he couldn't do that, he paid a price for it that was all out of proportion to what was possible.

The first step was to make him face reality, and Paul repeated his gentle demand. "Tell me what happened, Peter."

"I will." The words came out with an explosion of held-in air and Peter was on his feet, nearly tripping over the chair as he backed toward the closed office door. "I will, Paul," he insisted desperately, overriding any attempted protest, "but I've got to do... all the things that have to be done. I have to fill out the reports. I have to... there are things I have to do." The restless energy was back, instantly and violently shunting aside the lethargy of moments ago. He spread his hands in a vague gesture, half apology, half defensive block to keep Paul away from him. "All that paperwork. getting the charges filed. You know how it is. There's so much..." The words faded, the lost child look was back in his eyes for only a moment, then his hand found the door knob, and he was out into the noise and confusion of the squad room before Paul could form any argument.

Blaisdell sank into his chair. There really wasn't any argument he could make, anyway, he realized with a pang of regret. Peter had to deal with this the best way he could, and if he chose to bury it beneath police work, Paul had no choice but to allow that. *For the moment, Peter, but only for the moment...*

* * * * *

Sal Orlando was guarding the solitary confinement cell. He wasn't happy with that assignment, either, but Chief Strenlich hadn't made it a suggestion.

The prisoner hadn't made a sound. He just sat in the corner of the cot, clutching his sling-supported arm across his chest, and ignoring any questions that were posed to him. His lawyer was reportedly flying in from D.C. sometime during the night. That fact, alone, had caused quite a stir. Skalary and Caine had either lucked into a big bust or had really screwed up. Orlando shook his head at his own internal debate. Whatever happened now, it wasn't going to matter to Skalary. She was laid out on a slab in the morgue awaiting the impersonal attention of the coroner and the final insult of an autopsy.

Sal couldn't help but feel isolated down here in spite of the traffic that filtered through the lower level of the precinct building. All the news was upstairs, and all he'd heard were a few vague rumors about

what was going on. Extradition had been mentioned more than once, so he was giving some weight to that theory, but, other than that, he didn't know much.

His stomach rumbled, reminding him that it was past shift change, and he hadn't had dinner yet. There probably wasn't much sense in reminding the chief of that. He patted his well-rounded belly and remembered that Gina's meatballs were no doubt congealing in the pool of grease and tomato sauce right now. Maybe he'd snag a burger at McD's on the way home. Gina would never know. Except, of course, she would. She had that build-in radar that wives seemed to be issued at the pronouncement of the wedding vows. Or maybe it was that familiarity breeds mind reading. After all, they'd been married twenty-five years. He'd long ago given up trying to get away with anything.

"Chief sent me down."

Sal looked up to see Lenny James striding across the room in his long-legged saunter. A six-four and nearly three hundred solidly packed pounds, Lenny tended to quickly fill up a room. Sal lurched to his feet.

"Great, I was afraid we weren't going to have shift change," he said with a sudden sense of cheer and a ravenous growl from his belly.

"We aren't," Lenny responded with a grin. "I'm not your replacement; I'm your back-up."

Sal felt a mask of stupid confusion settle over his face. "Back-up?" he parroted. "Why the hell would I need back-up for a wounded, locked-up prisoner?"

"Ours not to reason why," Lenny said with a careless shrug of his massive shoulders. "The chief told me to get my considerable ass down here, and here I am. We're not supposed to let anybody see Graham unless we get the word directly from the captain or the chief."

"Sure, a lot of fuss for a drug dealer, don't you think?"

"Rumor has it--" Sal perked up immediately, and Lenny laughed. "Come on, Salvatore, you know I never spread rumors."

"Well, you'd better spread this one, or I'll let Gina set you up with her cousin's niece."

James threw his hands up in a defensive posture, and laughed again. "Anything but that!" he protested, then settled down onto the wooden stool near the metal door of the cell. "Okay, just this once. I heard they're going to extradite him out of the country."

Sal huffed. "That much I heard. I also heard we're fighting it."

"Of course, we're fighting it. Asshole shot one of ours. I also heard that he's not a drug dealer, but a hit man. Government hit man."

"Bullshit."

"Hey, you asked what I heard."

"I bet you heard he's an alien from outer space, too."

"Yeah, I think Burt was spreading that one."

"But would. He's got bats in his belfry; he might as well have aliens in the holding tank."

A new voice interrupted the speculation. "You guys want coffee?" Jim Reed stuck his head in through the open door that separated them from the computer and records rooms. "Gonna be a long night from what Strenlich said."

"Great," Sal muttered, imagining the prospect of pouring coffee into the hole in his mach earmarked for spaghetti and meatballs. "Sure, pour it on."

"Me, too," Lenny sighed.

* * * * *

Three phone calls separated Peter's leaving Blaisdell's office and Kwai Chang Caine's entering the same office. Paul glanced up, nodded, and spoke again into the phone, "He'll be fine, Annie. I'll make him come home with me. It's just going to take a while. I've tried to keep Internal Affairs off his back, but you know that isn't going to last very long, especially now that he's out wandering around the station on his own."

He nodded, either ignoring or oblivious to the fact that his wife could hardly read the response over the phone line even if she hadn't been blind. "Yeah," he said with the faintest trace of embarrassment, "I love you, too. Soon, Annie, as soon as I can. Bye."

When he hung the phone up and glanced over the frames of his glasses, the priest was still standing directly in front of the desk, silent in spite of what had to be serious concern over his son. Paul nodded at the chair across the desk, and Caine sat carefully in it, perched on the edge as if he had no intention of remaining there for any length of time.

The silence was disconcerting, and even though Paul had seen the priest use that technique on Peter, with remarkable success, he was surprised to realize how effective it was on him. At the same time he recognized the ploy, he fell prey to it.

"He's not taking this well, and it's going to get worse."

"He blames himself for Mary Margaret's death," Caine stated quietly.

"Yes, he does," Paul murmured, scrubbing at his jaw with his knuckled fist. "Peter's always been responsible for a lot more than he should be. It's part of his charm, but it's a hell of a weakness at the same time."

"He should not be alone," Caine pointed out.

"He's not," Paul snapped, then shook his head and rubbed his upper lip with one finger. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm not taking this too well myself. Skalany was a good cop and Peter... well, Peter thought a lot of her."

"You have the man who killed her in custody?"

"We have one of them, but it seems he's crawled right out of Pandora's Box. We're getting hit from all sides. This is one popular son of a bitch. The Feds want him. The Canadians want him. And he's got a high-powered lawyer on a plane from D.C. right now. We don't know any more than we did before we brought him in."

"Does Peter know all of this?"

"Hell, no, and I have no intention of letting him know any of it. Not yet, anyway. He's right on the edge, and if he gets any clue that this guy could slip out of our hands, he's going over. I want him out of here." Paul settled back into the worn leather of the creaking chair, linking his fingers across his chest. "Only I can't manage that, either."

"Can he not go home?"

An impatient shake of the head punctuated the answer. "No. There's a dead cop, a wounded suspect. Internal Affairs isn't going to let him out of here without at least token questioning. I think I can have it limited to that. They're not the real problem, though. It was a righteous shoot no matter how you look at it."

Caine tilted his head to the left and watched the play of light off the captain's blue eyes. "Then, what is the problem?"

"The problem is that it's really Peter's decision to go home, not mine, and he's not about to let Skalany's body get cold any faster than he can prevent it. He's going to pick at this until he finds something -- or someone stops him."

"He cannot help her by hurting himself."

"That's logic," Paul retorted with a wan smile, "not Peter's long suit. He'll figure he 'owes' her. He'll make it his personal responsibility to follow through on this guy."

"Then we can only be here to support him," Caine said, and the very simplicity of the statement, as well as its inherent truth, infuriated Blaisdell.

"He needs more than that," he insisted. "He has every right to expect more than that."

"Then we will give him more," Caine agreed.

* * * * *

"Peter, I don't think you're supposed to be down here," Lenny James said uncertainly. He put one massive paw out, laying his arm across the young detective's shoulders, a clumsy but sincere expression of empathy.

"Nobody sees him, Pete. The chief's orders," Sal put in, shuffling his feet, wanting to offer something in the way of sympathy, and not having any idea how to even start. "Not until his lawyer gets here."

"I just want to talk to him, guys," Peter said, spread hands illustrating his innocence. He slipped his pearl-handled Beretta out of its holster and offered it to Sal. "I promise I'll behave. I just want to ask him some questions. She was my partner."

Jim Reed chose that moment to come around the corner, coffee cups in hand, and he stopped dead in the doorway, his eyes taking in the tableau with a sinking feeling -- Peter Caine, shirt front soaked in his partner's blood, his face chalk-white, offering his gun to Orlando. Jim couldn't quell the thought that it would be a *major* mistake if Sal or Lenny let the kid inside that cell. A mental picture of Mary Margaret Skalany leaving the squad room earlier that evening, laughing and joking with Peter, halted his protest in this throat. Dread pooling in his stomach, he watched mutely as Sal reluctantly took the gun and handed Peter the keys.

"Just talk, Pete," Sal said, though his voice held out a little hope. "You don't do anything but talk to him, you understand me, kid?"

"That's all I want, Sal," Peter insisted, and then it was too late as he inserted the key into the lock, his hand trembling noticeably, and turned it with a clearly audible 'click' of sound as the lock disengaged.

* * * * *

"You cannot live his pain for him."

Blaisdell glanced up from beneath furrowed brows, peering over the frames of his reading glasses. Caine was still seated on the edge of the chair, his body ramrod-straight but somehow maintaining the illusion of placid composure.

"I've never tried to..." The thought faded, was lost in a sigh of resignation. "I would, you know," he said with a rueful smile. "I'd take everything bad away before it ever touched him."

Caine's responding smile caught Paul off guard. "As would I."

"Comes with the territory, I suppose."

"It is one of the functions of a father." The smile flickered again, a gentle touch of light across the priest's face. "The wishing, not the ability."

"It's like that with the girls, too," Paul said, though he had the distinct impression he was waxing nostalgic, simply talking out his emotions to lessen the impact of them. "All the way down to skinned knees. I remember--"

The shrill of the phone, a digital monster that sounded like a demented cricket, interrupted him. With a grimace of apology, he snatched up the receiver. His face blanched white, and he dropped it back onto its cradle.

"Peter," he said, bolting up from his chair, only peripherally seeing that Caine was already through the office door and halfway across the squad room on the way to the stairway.

* * * * *

"The son of a bitch killed her! He blew her brains all over the windshield and he's gonna walk! Damn you! He's gonna walk!"

Peter's voice, hoarse with the intensity of his rage, strangled by the death grip the huge cop had around his neck, told both Blaisdell and Caine all they needed to know even before they made it to the solitary confinement cell. The metal door clanged shut, and Peter and Lenny James crashed into the wall. James had a split lip, blood streaked across his face, his mouth set in a grim line as he struggled to keep the furious young cop away from the now secured door. Sal Orlando was picking himself up from the floor, his hands spread in a supplication of attempted reason.

"Pete, cut it out," Sal kept repeating. "You're gonna get yourself in deep shit. Cut it out!"

As Caine and Blaisdell rounded the corner, Jim Reed made a lunge for the grappling pair, and nearly took a booted foot in the face for the effort. He ducked at the last possible second, and Peter's kick went wild. It was enough, however, to throw the younger man off balance, and Jim caught the flailing leg. With Lenny's equilibrium restored, between them, they flipped Peter face down onto the floor, the lean body squirming desperately, still trying to get free. Lenny came down on top of him, twisting Peter's arm up behind him, his knee in the small of Peter's back. Jim grabbed the other arm with his right hand and pinned Peter's head to the floor, his left hand tangling in the sweat-soaked hair.

"Captain, please--" Sal turned to Blaisdell, one hand outstretched to him, a mute plea. "If you don't see this, it didn't happen. Five minutes? Please?"

"I can't--"

"Five minutes. What can five minutes cost?"

Blaisdell barely caught a glimpse of Caine dropping to one knee beside his still struggling son. Paul knew better than this. He would never ignore something like this from any other cop. It went against everything he believed in and was committed to do. He couldn't turn his back on it, for Peter's sake as well as the precinct's. He searched Orlando's eyes for a fraction of a second, and saw it all there. Cops protecting their own. Skalany had been one of theirs. Peter was one of theirs. It wasn't the captain's foster son they were willing to cover for; it was one of their own.

Paul turned and walked back to the stairwell.

Feeling the strain in Peter's body, absorbing the heat of rage that radiated from him, Caine reached down and stroked a hand through his son's hair. Uncontrolled fury and grief rippled through his fingers and into his body, a shudder of passion that welled through him on a tide of pain.

"Peter," he said softly, his voice more compelling for its softness, "would you dishonor Mary Margaret with this behavior?"

The fight vanished as suddenly as it had begun, and Peter went limp beneath Lenny, gasping for breath that wouldn't come into lungs starved for air. It seemed minutes before Peter responded; it was only seconds. Finally, he managed a choked "no".

Lenny glanced uncertainly at the priest, then said, "I'm gonna let you go, Peter. Don't make me put you back down, kid. Okay?"

"Okay." It was a whisper of sound, the word barely recognizable, but Lenny accepted it and shifted his considerable bulk off Peter's body.

Caine helped his son to a shaky stand, and stood back while Lenny brushed imaginary dirt off the young cop's shoulder with awkward solicitude.

"I'm sorry," Peter murmured, staring at a vague point on the tiled floor. "I didn't mean--"

"It didn't happen," Lenny interrupted, dabbing at an eye that was already going black and blue.

"We must talk," Caine offered as an avenue of escape for his red-faced son. "And Paul wishes to see you," he added.

Peter's head jerked up and his face washed free of color. "I can't--"

"You can," Caine countered, taking a firm grip on his son's arm and steering him toward the door.

* * * * *

"You can't let him leave."

Peter was on his third circuit of the cramped office, nervous energy and anger radiating from him in waves.

"It's not up to me," Paul countered, forcing a lining of steel into his voice. "And it isn't up to you."

Peter swung to a jerky halt. "He killed Mary Margaret."

"He's killed people in L.A., too, Peter. That's why they want him."

"You're going to turn them over? Just like that?"

"It's done, Peter. Let it go."

"You can't just--"

"Let... it... go."

"She's my--" Peter flushed scarlet, and his eyes misted before the curtain of control slipped back into place. "She was my partner. L.A. doesn't have any more right to this bastard than we do."

Paul chuffed out a breath of air, an explosion of pent-up emotion that demanded release. He scrubbed at his eyes with the knuckles of his hand, then sank back into the creaking chair. Resignation settled over him with a physical weight, and he allowed himself the luxury of considering his next words very carefully. The moment's respite didn't help. There was no way to say what he had to say.

"You have a choice to make, Peter," he finally ventured. "You can take two weeks' vacation, or you can rack up two weeks' suspension. It's up to you."

"What?" It was a demand lacked with disbelief.

Paul ignored the tone. "I'd rather you chose vacation. You have the time off; use it." He nodded toward the Shaolin priest. "Spend some time with your father. You've both earned it."

With characteristic stubbornness, Peter had heard only what he chose to hear. "Suspension?" he repeated.

"Or vacation," Paul said evenly.

"You'd suspend me? And let that son of a bitch--"

"Peter, this is not an option. It's an order. I want you out of here, and I want you out now."

"Fine." The word was expelled in a huff of air as Peter jerked upright. "Fine," he repeated through clenched teeth. "You want me out of here? I'm outta here. You can take your--"

Caine stepped forward and placed one hand on his son's upper arm, the fingers knotting into the corded muscle. "Peter."

Yanking the arm away, Peter backed away from them both. "No," he said, spitting the word out. "I can deal with this. I don't need anybody to... to..." The anger broke on a wave of unwanted grief, and he lost the thread of the words. He shook his head, lifted one hand as if to reach out to one, or both, of them, then spun on his heel and was through the door.

* * * * *

Red lights flashed, colliding with strobes of blue from the assembled squad cars. Nick Knight ran a hand wearily through his dark hair, then over his chin.

He needed a shave.

He needed to get away from this shit, this scent of blood.

He needed to kill his partner.

Don Schanke was crouched beside the gaping trunk of the unmarked sedan, peering in thoughtfully at the heaped bodies of the two plain-clothes detectives. Obscene slashes of blood obscured both throats, leaving little question in the M.E.'s mind about the cause of death. The metallic scent of gore filled the chilled night air, and Nick backed away from the gruesome sight, his reason not entirely due to the grim scene of death.

Hunger radiated out of his body, and the lure of scent was enough to send him reeling backward into Jack Brittington's stabilizing influence.

"Take it easy, Nick," the medical examiner murmured, one hand tight on Knight's arm, providing unobtrusive, but tangible support.

Nick gave him a sickly smile, then heaved in a deep breath and returned his attention to his partner.

Schanke glanced up at him and shook his head, grinning at his partner's discomfort. "You gotta toughen up, Nick," he said jovially. "Comes with the territory."

"Bullshit," Jack cut in. "Slaughter doesn't belong in any territory, Schanke. You're just turning into a ghoul."

"Oh yeah," Don retorted, "this from a guy who spends his nights cutting up corpses and digging through intestines."

Captain Brunetti saved Jack from having to respond. His normally sober face was blanched white, his mouth snarled into a severe line of distaste and anger. "We got word that there's already a hit set up locally for this guy to pull off, and the bodies aren't even cold yet. This son of a bitch is still in the city, and somebody big is pulling his strings."

"You got all this already?" Knight demanded skeptically.

"We got factions here, Nick," Brunetti said softly, dropping his voice to a low pitch. "We got high-up people who want him stopped and even higher-up people who don't want him touched. We're in the middle of a political tug-of-war. And we're stepping over bodies everywhere we turn."

"Well, hell," Nick said, his face twisting into an unrepentant sneer, "wish somebody had told these two guys that it was all a game and they didn't have to take it so seriously."

Brunetti glanced reluctantly back into the blood-drenched trunk and shook his head. "Bring him in, Nick," he said, and there was no trace of compromise in the tone.

* * * * *

Two days of inactivity were starting to wear on him. The answering machine blinked frantically with unanswered calls, the television droned unheard with its mind-numbing array of soaps and Geraldo-clones. Peter woke late on the third day, feeling like he'd spent a week in a drunken stupor, at the very least. His mouth tasted vile, his apartment was more of a mess than usual, and his scrubbed one hand across three days of neglected stubble.

An hour later, he was showered, shaved and had most of the debris cleared out of the living room and bedroom. His stomach rumbled a protest of neglect, and he downed a beer and two bologna sandwiches to appease it. It rumbled louder. Finally shunting aside the whispers of unease that teased at his mind, he stabbed the playback button on the answering machine and sat out the full tape of phone calls, mentally chalking up just how many were from Paul. Eventually, his captain had given up on him and brought in the big guns. Annie's voice on the machine twisted a knot of guilt into his stomach, and he had decided to at least call her and reassure her when the final message drove even that thought out of his head.

"Peter, I must talk to you. Please."

The message clicked off and Peter sat stunned in the chair, trying to dredge up any memory of his father's resorting to the use of a telephone. He would have been willing to bet his father didn't even know his phone number, much less that he would stoop to suing it. The image of the Shaolin priest in a phone booth was so foreign to his impression of Kwai Chang Caine that it was simply incomprehensible.

He had already reached for the receiver when he realized there was no way to return that particular call. Instead, he shifted mental gears and punched in a familiar number.

"One-Oh-One, Metro Division."

Peter sighed with relief as he ID'ed the voice. This was going to be an easy one. "Celia," he began in a disgustingly cheerful tone, "what's the latest on the Edmund Graham file?"

"Peter?" The squeak that passed for Celia Rodriguez's voice chirped in his ear. "How you doin', Sugar?" The squeak dropped to a concerned peep, and he smiled at his image of her straightening her tiny form in the chair as if suddenly called to attention. Probably primping her tightly curled hair at the same time. Celia always adapted body language to her mood and tone.

"I'm fine," he said quickly before she could get into her motherly mode. "I just wanted to see how things were going."

"You haven't hear?"

This time it was Peter who sat up straight. "heard what?"

"They sent him out that first night. L.A. raised such a stink that they shipped him down and turned him over rather than let Canada have him and risk his getting out of the country. Then L.A. found their two detectives with their throats cut and stuffed into the trunk of their car."

"They lost him?" It was a breathy demand, a plea for her to contradict him.

She didn't. "They say they got decent leads on him and that he's still in the city. They say it's just a matter of time. They say they've got their best people on it. If you ask me, they got bupkus, Pete."

"Who's in charge down there?" He tried to keep his tone casual, but his emotions were bubbling so close to the surface that he was sure she could hear the tension lacing through the question.

Celia hesitated. "Aren't you supposed to be off this case, Peter?" she finally ventured.

"I just thought I could call down there, Celia, give them what I have on the guy. Can't hurt, and I don't step on any interdepartmental toes that way." Her uncertain silence pushed him to continue. "He killed my partner, Ceel. I just want to call them. See if I can give them any more than they have, that's all."

She sighed, and he knew he had her.

"Detective Knight," she said, the tone telling him that she was reading it off the computer screen as she scrolled the hastily entered records. "Nick Knight, L.A. Homicide. Look, Pete, don't you do anything but call, you hear me?"

"I hear you." *Well, it's not quite a lie*, he thought with a twinge of conscience.

* * * * *

L.A. Homicide looked remarkably like Metro Major Crimes.

The walls were a combination of drab grey and pea-green institutional paint peeling off in flaked strips. Posters and signs, directions and threats hung rag-tag off the walls, and mismatched wooden chairs lined the room in uneven ranks. One chair sat upended and broken in the corner, mute witness to a misunderstanding that no one had gotten around to cleaning up after, and the people slumped over desks or being interrogated, interviewed and variously hassled could have been plunked down from the same set as the One-Oh-One. Interchangeable cop shops. Even the faced were the same, a hodge-podge mix of every walk of life with the emphasis being on the predator and prey that late hours seemed to bring out into the open. Muggers and druggies and drunks and wife beaters sat at desks or paced the floor in varying degrees of resignation or anger, along with their victims and the resident crack pots.

Peter took it all in with half his attention. The other half scanned the faces, trying to focus on the object of his current wrath without benefit of a description. It didn't take long to realize that he really couldn't tell the good guys from the bad half the time. He settled for the last resort; he asked.

A badge at the belted waist of her leather mini-skirt identified her as a detective, so Peter caught her arm as she started past him.

"Could you tell me where to find Nick Knight?" he asked, his voice nearly lost in the chaos that flowed around them like a river parted in its passing by a tree stump.

"Knight?" she repeated, giving him a second, closer look. "Who wants to know?" She popped a bubble of pink chewing gum and blew her tough-cop image in the single gesture, grinning up at him as he pulled his badge out of his pocket.

"Metro?" she said doubtfully and glanced up at his face again. "You're a long way from home, honey."

"Knight," Peter said with an edge in his tone, dropping his badge over a loop on his jeans.

"Yeah." This time the bubble-pop didn't come as a surprise, only a mild irritant. "I shoulda known just lookin' at you. Shoulda been able to tell right off. Over there." She aimed a scarlet-nailed finger over her shoulder, pointing vaguely across the room. "Last desk. Can't miss him."

Shrugging off the rest of her oblique comment, Peter saw two men in plain clothes leaning over a desk, studying a map. "Thanks," he mumbled and pushed past her. She took one last, appraising look at his retreating form, shrugged, and continued toward the stairs leading to the lock-up.

There were two of them bent over the map, and Peter figured the balding guy for Knight. He looked like the kind who'd let a murderer slip through his fingers while he sent out for pizza. The other guy he practically ignored, except to note an impression of him out of habit. His target was well-fed and round-faced with the suburban look that said he had a wife and a ranch-style house outside the city with the requisite station wagon and a dog, maybe even kids. His hair was disappearing on top; maybe that explained the Elvis-style sideburns that spanned his cheeks and jaw. A cigarette dangled from one side of his mouth, bobbing in time to the words he was speaking to the man next to him.

The dark-haired man Peter had so casually discarded was bent over the map, his height accented rather than camouflaged by his position. His hair was dark, a little long for the police force -- *shorter than your own*, Peter reminded himself as he automatically catalogued the two men into his portable mental file of useful and useless information -- and his face was angular, handsome, and pale, a direct contrast to the darkness of the hair and his black leather jacket.

Both men looked up when Peter stopped beside the desk.

"You Detective Knight?" he demanded of the balding man.

"Me?" Don Schanke laughed at the idea. Not that he hadn't thought about it before. Being a bachelor on the night shift with a cool car and women falling over their feet for him... Yeah, the idea had its appeal. "Naw," he replied with a touch of regret, hooking a thumb at Nick. "He's Knight."

Nick was never sure if he had started to put his hand out or had simply begun the obvious question. The kid didn't give a sign of his intention, simply struck with the speed and grace of a snake uncoiling for an attack. The solid left cross caught Knight on the point of his chin and catapulted him over the cluttered desk. He landed in a heap of files and maps on the other side, loose papers gently cascading onto him in a graceful shower of official records.

The resultant dizziness didn't last long, and Nick found himself staring up at a tall, dark-haired young man straddled over him, pure rage radiating out of a bleak expression. From his position on the floor, he could see the pearl-handled butt of a pistol at the kid's waist, the badge flipped over the belt loop beside it. He stayed where he was. A half-caught glimpse of Schanke told him that his partner was

holding back the roomful of other cops, along with the nearly unbearable urge to break out in laughter at the sight of Nick on his ass on the floor, tears pooling in his eyes from the force of the unexpected blow.

"Get up." It was a growl, a snarl of demand that barely made it past the tightly clamped lips of the young stranger.

"As soon as I know what the hell's going on," Nick assured him, keeping his voice admirably neutral under the circumstances.

"Didn't know you had a kid brother, Nick," Schanke said, finally allowing at least a snicker at his partner's expense.

The comment released the other cops from their poise on the edge of coming to the aid of their fellow officer, and the hubbub suddenly went back to normal in the busy squad room. All except for Captain Brunetti who stood in his doorway, silent and observant, wondering if anything would ever be quiet and normal with Knight around.

Nick squinted up at Schanke, then back at the man still towering over him. *A little resemblance, maybe*, he thought, then shrugged off the thought. A faint likeness didn't explain an unprovoked attack, though, and he said, "If I get up, do we have to continue this on a back-alley level, or can you just tell me what your problem is?"

Not granted even the emotional release of a good fight, Peter swallowed his anger and forced himself to back off. At the step backward, Nick clambered to his feet, touching one hand gingerly to his jaw, working it to each side. Reassured that it was still functional, he propped one hip on his desk.

"you're a cop," he offered, "so I assume this isn't the usual way you introduce yourself. What do you say we start over?"

It took Peter a moment to pull in his loose ends, but he finally recognized that this was the second time this week he'd done something stupid and rash. It was time to start reining himself in, or he wouldn't do himself or Mary Margaret any good. He knew better than to fly off the deep end like this; had, in fact, kept himself under tight control for years, usually with a lot better success than this. He dragged in a breath of air and took another step backward, groping for an apology he couldn't find within himself. He finally opted for, "I'm with the Hundred-and-First, Metro Division. We had Edmund Graham in custody. We had him in a cell. We *had* him. Do you understand that? *We had him.*"

Nick nodded. "And you figure we lost him."

"That's what it looks like to me."

"You realize you could have gotten yourself killed walking into a police station and attacking another cop?"

"Graham killed my partner. He shot her through the head without a whisper of conscience. We had him on it, and he would have paid for what he did if you hadn't pulled him out from under us."

"We had first rights," Nick countered. "He's killed people here, a mayoral candidate and--"

"You let him go!"

"We didn't *let* him go." This time it was Nick's voice that dipped into a snarl, the image fixed in the back of his mind, vivid and festering. "He killed two of our detectives when he escaped -- slit their throats like sacrificial offerings. No one *let* him do anything."

"That doesn't change the fact that he's back on the streets now. He could be anywhere," Peter insisted.

"He's not anywhere," Schanke interrupted, ignoring the glare that Knight tossed his way. "We've got good leads on him. We know who he's after and we've got the guy staked out. It's just a matter of hours before--" Don look past the young detective and met the narrowed eyes of his partner. He spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Well, he's got a right to know we're on this guy's tail, Nick. Come on, it was his partner who got killed."

Peter spun toward Nick. "Who's he after? How many people do you have on him? You don't know this guy. He's good. He's a real pro. You can't just--"

The phone shrilled in wordless insistence on Nick's desk from beneath the heaps of disturbed papers, releasing Knight from the need to answer the demands.

"Knight," he snapped into the receiver. "When? Are you sure? Damn." He dropped the phone back to the crumpled pile of paper and glanced at Schanke, then at Peter. "He's made another hit and not where we expected it. Our information is either wrong or tainted. Are you on this case?"

"Yeah," Peter lied without a hitch in his voice, the ease of the answer a mute testimony to his state of mind.

"Then you might as well come with us."

* * * * *

Brunetti stepped back into his office, chewing at his lower lip. This was not good. Not good, at all. He dropped into his chair, tapping his fingers against the scarred desk top. The One-Oh-One. If memory served, that was Paul Blaisdell's territory.

He tugged open his drawer and ferreted out the tattered directory. A moment's thumb-guided search and he found the number beside Blaisdell's name. Memory tugged at him as he punched in the phone number and waited out the rings. He hadn't seen Paul years. They'd been friends once, the casual kind of friendship that never quite dies but is put on permanent hold by virtue of distance. How long had it been? Years.

The nasal voice in his ear broke through his reverie.

"Blaisdell," he said, not expecting to find Paul at the station at this hour, but figuring he was going to have to go through channels anyway, he might as well start with the receptionist.

"May I say who's calling?" the irritating whine demanded.

"Homicide, Captain Brunetti," he responded with a start. You mean he's there at this hour?"

"Everybody's on extended shifts," the voice tossed off with the inflection indicating this was not the first time she'd faced this question. "I'll put your through."

Brunetti smiled at the growled "Blaisdell" that interrupted the intercom ring.

"Paul, Joe Brunetti. Got a question for you." He heard the creak of the chair as Blaisdell straightened in his seat at the voice coming, literally, out of his past.

"Joe, I guess I should have been expecting your call. Still comes as a surprise. Sorry it's under these circumstances."

"Oh? You knew he was here?"

That was met with silence, then, "He who?"

"We got one of your detectives down here raising hell. From the way you said you were expecting my call, I thought you knew he was here?"

"One of my people? I haven't--" There was a sharp intake of air, then the growl deepened. "What's his name?"

"I didn't get it," Brunetti said with a laugh. "He just walked through the door and decked one of my detectives. Damned near got himself shot. Nick seemed to handle it all right, so I let it slide. I figured he was sent down by you."

Assaulting cops is becoming a habit, he thought sourly. Aloud, he said, "Let me guess -- young, dark hair, and pissed off at the world."

"You got him. What's his stake in this?"

"His partner was killed by the guy we transferred to you. He's *supposed* to be on vacation."

"He's got a funny slant on vacations then. What do you want us to do with him?"

"Is he there?"

"No, he went out with my two detectives to check on a call that just came in. They figured he was officially sanctioned. A little hot-headed, but sanctioned. He flashed a badge; that's how I knew to call you."

"Can you hold onto him for me?"

Brunetti sat up straighter at that; the chair loudly protested the shift of his bulk. "Isn't that a little extreme? I mean, you said the kid was on vacation. He might be sticking his nose in, but Knight can handle him, I promise you."

"He's a loose cannon right now, Joe," Blaisdell said quietly. "I don't want him walking into the middle of anything that could get him killed or cost him his career."

"Who is he, Paul?"

"His name's Peter Caine. He's my foster son."

* * * * *

"Would have to be Chink Town. These people aren't exactly tuned in, are they?" Schanke said, snarling the words out of the corner of his mouth, pitching his voice low so that only Nick and the young detective beside him could hear.

Peter Caine glanced up and asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nick glanced at him, quirking one eyebrow at the tension he felt radiating out of the kid, stronger here than it had been at the station. He shifted his jaw gingerly and reflected that Schanke might want to tread lightly. Notably, he didn't bother to mention that to his partner.

"Nothin'. Nothin'," Schanke assured him, spreading his hands in a gesture of aggrieved innocence. "It's just that they seem to be a little 'old-worldly', if you know what I mean. You know, like they think Bruce Lee movies are art and, well, you know, they're kinda simple."

Peter shook his head impatiently but didn't bother to respond. Nick ignored Schanke and watched the forensics team close up their equipment. The blanket was adjusted over the body, and it was finally lifted into the coroner's wagon. The woman's hand slipped off the side of the narrow stretcher and dangling for a moment before being moved back up beside her. Long, delicate fingers were spider-webbed with ribbons of blood, two drops falling to the asphalt before the arm was rearranged. Nick had a quick glance of ornate rings on the small hand stained crimson with gore.

A slight-built, stooped man pushed his way through the medical personnel, chattering in frantic Chinese, obviously asking desperate questions, his panic tumbling the words on top of each other.

"Damn," Schanke muttered, "these Chinese sure are an excitable lot. Must be a heredity thing."

Again Nick caught the irritation in Peter's dark eyes as he glanced at Schanke. Ignoring the comment with obvious effort, the young cop caught at the flowing sleeve of the frightened grey-haired man and spoke to him, gently and reassuringly, in perfect Cantonese. By the time the elderly man was satisfied and nodding his gratitude, Nick was grinning openly at a gaping Schanke. Bowing effusively, the old man moved away, vanishing into the crowd.

Peter Caine watched him disappear, then looked back at Schanke and Knight. Without changing expression, he said, "We don't all look alike."

Schanke stuttered out, "Hey, I didn't mean--" but Peter was already looking beyond him into the darkness between the buildings. He brushed past both Nick and Schanke and ducked into the mouth of the alleyway. Nick wasted no time following him, his partner on his heels still in the throes of his disjointed apology. His vision not impeded by the pitch blackness between the buildings, Nick clearly saw the man crouched down by the service entrance, partially concealed by the rank of dented trash cans and refuse. Knight grabbed Schanke's arm and flung him back into the shadows at the mouth of the alley, the sudden assault shutting Don up as effectively as a hand over his mouth would have.

Peter hadn't missed the figure hovering by the back door of the bar, either; obviously the man had been his reason for ducking into the dark corridor. He didn't hesitate simply hauled the man out from the shadows and demanded, "What the hell are you doin' in here?"

A rattled spate of rapid Cantonese shot-gunned out of the man's mouth, but, unlike the elderly man at the street, there was no panic or uncertainty in the tone of the words. The young cop barked back a question, also in Cantonese, waited for the answer, then lowered his voice enough to thwart the eavesdropping cops at the far end of the alley. Nick, not being subject to auditory limitations, heard every word clearly. Unfortunately, he understood none of the language that this kid from upstate spoke so fluently. He had no choice but to overhear a completely useless conversation and wait for Caine to share whatever he was getting.

And he was obviously getting an earful. Nick could hear that in the timbre of his words, the emphasis of tone, the undercurrent of excitement. He bit back the nagging thought that the kid wasn't about to share whatever information he was collecting with the two L.A. cops.

Another two minutes of muffled conversation, and Peter released the man who ducked into the back entrance of the bar and disappeared. Nick had a bad feeling about it long before Peter turned and headed back to the mouth of the alley, starting past them without slowing.

Nick caught his arm, and the younger man swung around to face him. *Nope*, Nick groused silently, *we're not about to exchange confidences here, are we, kid?*

He had to try, anyway. "What did you get?"

Peter grinned at him, the change of expression pulling the strain out of his face, making him look even younger. "What's the matter, no speakee Chinese?"

"My partner's a bigot, kid, not me. What did you get?"

Some of the smart ass veneer vanished, and Peter hauled in a meet Knight's eyes, though, and Nick heard the lie to the words even before he saw it in the expressive face.

"Nothing," Peter said. "He just wanted to know what had happened. Like the old man."

Nick grinned without humor. "What to try that again?" he suggested.

After a moment's thought, Peter nodded. "Okay. He said the lady was some kind of local celebrity. Some political connection. Said he thought it was an assassination, not just a random killing."

"Any ideas on who the perp is?"

Peter hesitated too long then shrugged his shoulders. "Just that some guy popped out of the dark, blew her away, and vanished."

"In a puff of smoke?" Schanke put in, irritated at being sidelines, irked that his partner seemed to be putting so much weight in what the out-of-town cop had to say.

Evidently that didn't deserve an answer, at least from Peter's point of view. He shrugged again and started to turn. Once more, Nick's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"What?" Peter demanded.

"Where you going?"

"I'm on vacation." The innocence in the young face didn't quite make it to the dark eyes.

"Look, Peter, if you've got something, why don't you let us help? You don't know this city. We do. If we all go running off in different directions, it's just going to take twice as long to come up with anything."

For a second, Nick thought he had broken through the facade, then Peter shook his head. "I appreciate the offer," he said, his tone almost wistful. "But you guys aren't the best tour guides I've ever come across, you know? I'm just here on vacation. Like I said."

"No," Nick said with a decisive shake of his head, "you said you were on this case."

When Peter ignored him and turned away again, Nick didn't try to stop him. He had no doubts that physical force would be the only way to keep Peter Caine from doing exactly what he had come to L.A. to do, and he wasn't ready to resort to that. *Not yet*, a cynical little voice intoned in the back of his mind.

"Schank, you go in with the body. See what the M.E. says. I'll get back with you."

"Where you going?"

"I'm going to play shadow."

* * * * *

The informant in the alley had been awfully convenient.

That knowledge pestered at Peter's mind, sending tiny twinges of worry up into the tendons of his neck. He had a pretty good tension headache going by the time he found the hotel the Chinese man had set up for the meet.

This thing -- the guilt about Mary Margaret's death -- was making him reckless, and the worst part of it was that he knew it. It would be one thing to walk into a set-up arranged by one of his own street contacts; it was totally different when it was a complete stranger in a city he didn't know. He still wasn't sure why he hadn't leveled with Knight and allowed the other cop to come with him. *Territorial imperative*, he supposed with a wry twist of thought.

The memory of his partner -- and friend -- slumped against the passenger side door of the unmarked sedan, the splayed patter of her blood on the spider-webbed glass wouldn't release him mind. *I'm sorry, Skalany*, he pleaded silently, not for the first time, *I should have been able to do something*.

It didn't help that Mary Margaret wouldn't have agreed with him. It didn't help that she would have been the first person to stand here glaring at him with her hands fisted on her shapely hips, demanding an explanation for his current state of mind. All he could see was that she was dead, and he had been there, had been only yards away. Somehow... somehow he should have been able to prevent it from happening. *Like Kira...*

It didn't matter that he was beating himself to death with guilt that Skalany wouldn't have inflicted on him. She was dead. She'd never razz him about his social life again, never steal another donut out of his hand, never ruffle his hair with that oddly flirtatious/motherly way she had of keeping him off-balance. She was dead. *Like Kira...* He'd been there when Kira Blakemore was killed, too. Partnering Peter Caine didn't seem to hold out the promise of reaching pension status.

He shook off the thoughts with a shudder that traveled the length of his body, then he stopped into the elaborate lobby of the exclusive hotel. The main floor was bathed in muted light, heavily decorated with Victorian furniture, and carefully appointed with well-tended plants and indoor trees. Classical music filtered through the air with a tinkle of sound designed to soothe the nerves and promote a relaxed atmosphere. The wash of melody calmed him perceptibly and he crossed the huge, marble-columned lobby as if he knew exactly where he was going.

The elevator released him onto the seventh floor, and he stepped into plush carpeting, oriented himself by the room numbers, then took a left. 1745 was halfway down the deserted corridor.

Graham. The Chinese informant had said Graham. There wasn't any doubt. The pattern fit. The drug connection. The cold-blooded assassination. Knight would track down the dead woman's connections and eventually find out that she was an outspoken anti-drug candidate from the local Chinatown district. She had been vocal just one time too many. It wouldn't matter then, though. Knight was too far behind. Peter would have Graham gift-wrapped and delivered before the L.A. detective had collected even that much evidence.

The man in the alley had been understandably edgy, distrustful. It wasn't unusual for an informant to set up a meet in a neutral place, and hotels were common choices for the exchange of cash for information. Still... this had a bad feel to it.

He rapped his knuckles sharply against the door. At the first strike, the door slid open, brushing against the heavy pile of carpet.

"No problem," he whispered, his hand dipping into his waist holster and re-emerging with the secure feeling provided by the pearl-handled butt of the Beretta cold against his palm. The snitch was simply making it easy. Then, why was the hair at the back of his neck bristling?

At the first movement of the door, he had faded back against the wall, his breath held, his heart pounding in his ears. The interior of the room was dark; he'd seen that much as he dodged sideways. He'd be back-lighted in the hallway if he stepped through the door. He had no choice. Making the decision, he darted inside, shifting instantly to the left and going to one knee. There was no sound, no movement. Only the darkness of what appeared to be an empty room. Could he possibly have arrived before his contact? The unlocked door was a nagging worry.

Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, he searched the room, trying distinguish if there was a body intertwined with any of the furnishings. Only silence met his visual search. Carefully, his footsteps muffled by the heavy carpet, he edged his way across the room toward the ajar door of what had to be the bedroom. Beyond the partially opened door, he could see only more blackness.

He had decided he'd beaten the man back to his room by the time he made it to the bedroom door. Instinct took him again to the left, in a crouch to minimize himself as a target as he slipped into the bedroom.

Peter never heard the silencer-muffled shot as the bullet tore into his side, the aim spoiled by his automatic dodge to the left. It felt like a giant fist had slammed into him, stealing the air from his lungs with an explosive burst of pressure. He was catapulted into the wall, then fell face-down onto the cushion of carpeting.

The figure, shrouded in darkness in the large wing-backed chair, rose without a sound. He didn't bother sparing more than a cursory glance at the downed cop sprawled by the door. One gloved hand placed the pistol on the dresser top, then he stepped over the body and left the room as unobtrusively as he had come

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Pain lanced through his body, centered in a pool of blazing fire. He grunted through sleep, then read the flash of terror, a panicked plea for help, somehow inexplicably aimed directly at him.

Kwai Chang Caine bolted upright from the thin mat that served as his bed, sweat beading across his upper lip and forehead.

The room was dark. Vague, hulking shapes gathered in the shadowed corners; shape that gradually took on their true forms, plants, a gi hung from a hook in the wall, a small desk. He had no sense of an enemy. No intuition of threat.

The pain that had thrust him out of sleep had been real, though. And he was very much afraid that he knew exactly what the source of that pain was.

* * * * *

Nick glanced at his watch. It was *still* only five minutes later than the last time he'd looked. The kid had been upstairs for nearly thirty minutes now, and, for Nick, time was literally running out as it edged closer to dawn. He'd waited long enough.

The elevator joined the conspiracy against him and took its time getting to the lobby, but it was empty when it did arrive, a small mercy. He stabbed the button for the seventeenth floor and waited out the ride, grateful that he'd been close enough behind Peter to catch the floor number when the other detective had taken this same elevator a half hour earlier. That only left the entire seventeenth floor to search. Fortunately, Nick had an edge there that most cops weren't issued.

The doors wheezed open, and he stepped into the plushly carpeted corridor, considered his bearings for a moment, then angled off into the right wing. He walked slowly through the hallway, sensing Peter's passage, but quickly becoming alarmed when he realized the kid's presence was fading rather than becoming stronger. He *knew* he was getting closer; Caine's aura should be growing more immediate, not waning into a vague, amorphous perception. Before he touched a hand to the right door, he already knew what had happened. He didn't hesitate at the now-locked door. One palm struck the lock, and it gave with a faint popping sound.

there was no one else here; he knew that before he stepped over the threshold, and he headed unerringly for the bedroom, not bothering to turn on the lights as he entered.

He had scented the blood all the way out in the hall, detected the pulse of life before he went to one knee beside Peter's sprawled form. Blood had spread across the back of his shirt and jeans and was pooled beneath him, soaked into the ruined carpet. Nick turned him gently onto his back, earning an agonized groan at the movement. More blood at waist-level told him both where the bullet had gone in and that it had gone straight through the body. A good sign, depending upon what it had torn through in its path.

Peter's eyes fluttered, but didn't open.

"Fire," he mumbled, one hand groping for Nick, the fingers clutching into the soft material of his shirt. Knight eased the grip free and ran one hand over Peter's forehead.

"It's okay, kid," he said. "There's no fire. You're going to be okay, just lie still."

"Comin' at us..." Peter insisted, lost in a familiar nightmare, shaking his head, the words trailing off into nonsense that Nick could no longer decipher.

Nick got to his feet, made his decision, and found the phone. It only took two rings before the voice came over the line, weary and with a faint tinge of irritation. "Medical Examiner."

"Jack, I need your help."

"Nick? What's wrong? Do you know what time it is?"

"That's part of the reason I need your help."

"Okay..." There was a moment's silence as Brittington considered questioning the evasive phone call, then rejected it as Nick had known he would. "What do you need?"

"I need you, your car, and your medical kit..." Nick glanced around the room, made a mental run through of the set-up of the hotel and added, "Come to the Regency, meet me in the service alley off Broad and Hawthorne, and, Jack... make it fast."

"On my way."

Nick hung up the phone and glanced toward the window. It was less than an hour away from sunrise.

Stripping the cases from the down pillows on the bed, Nick allowed a fleeting smile as he imagined the maid coming in on this mess in the morning, then he used the cases apply pressure against the

entry and exit wounds. Peter pushed at his hands, but with no more strength than Nick could counter with a shrug. Brown eyes flickered open, shut, then open again, trying to find a focus on the blur that was Nick.

"Get out..." Peter mumbled, his hand tugging Nick closer in mute rejection of the warning.

"Take it easy," Nick said, rebuckling Peter's belt to hold the makeshift compresses in place.

"Help's on the way. Just hold on."

"It's burning..."

"I know it hurts, Peter, just--"

"No, the fire... please get him out..."

Nick shook his head. The kid was hallucinating, and here he was trying to hold a coherent conversation with him. He got stiffly to his feet and crossed the room. The window overlooked the alleyway, just as he'd figured. He tugged at the latch, then lifted the frame. *Now would be a good time to pass out, kid,* he thought absently.

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The fire faded, but the burning didn't. The light wavered, bleaching into formless white, then darkening with a cloud of sightlessness. He had to get up, get to his... The dream vanished, and he felt the carpet beneath him, hands on his body, tugging his jacket into place, moving him slightly. He couldn't quite push himself past the lethargy that kept him pinned to the floor in spite of the nagging insistence that he was still in danger.

A face floated through the darkness above him, at first shapeless, anonymous, then he saw the dark eyes in the pale oval of features. He catalogued Nick's name, but at the moment, it didn't mean much. Except that he was safe, or what passed for safe, he amended the thought.

He didn't trust Knight.

Mary Margaret's face swam before him, a silent accusation, and he tried to force himself up. Words floated down to him, unintelligible, soothing, and he relaxed again in the blending of pain and peace.

Sleep, or unconsciousness, he wasn't sure which, had nearly overtaken him when he felt movement being forced on him. He tried to protest, but the words garbled in his mind and wouldn't make it past his throat. He was lifted, and the motion woke the pain in his side with a pulsing wave of agony. Then, he felt the touch of cold air on his face, momentarily clearing his mind.

His eyes opened but refused to show him anything rational. He saw the windows passing, felt his hand fisted into the soft material of a shirt -- Knight's shirt -- and, fascinated, he realized through a fog of incomprehension that they were outside. Somehow, they were going down, but the windows flashing past his blurred vision were outside the rooms. Glimpses of curtains and interiors spun before him like a badly spliced film, interspersed with expanses of the brick exterior of the hotel.

And it wasn't even frightening.

* * * * *

"Damn, Nick, next time try the elevator," Jack Brittington swore as Knight and his burden dropped lightly into the darkened alley beside him.

"Don't you think I'd have been a little conspicuous like this?" Nick retorted, canting his head toward his armload of unconscious cop.

Jack flung open the back door, but a surreptitious glance at his watch, and waited until Nick had settled Peter into the back seat of the sedan.

"Where?" Jack demanded.

"My place. And don't bother stopping for red lights."

* * * * *

The station was never quiet, not even in the dead of night.

Paul Blaisdell finished his last 'cover-up' call and dropped the receiver into its cradle. Sagging forward against the desk, he rested his face in his cupped hands and indulged in the luxury of closing his eyes.

Damn kid. Paul was not looking forward to hours behind the wheel of the car. Peter was coming home, though, even if his foster father had to tie and gag him and throw him into the trunk. In fact, that scenario was beginning to have a certain appeal to it. At least it would be quiet on the trip back.

He considered calling on the kid's father, but quickly discarded the idea. Peter loose on a rampage was hard enough to explain to Annie without having to try to convey that concept to a Shaolin priest. Better to drag Peter back and then deal with the fallout on Paul's home turf.

A cup of coffee. One for the road. He started to pry his weary body out of the chair when the phone buzzed again.

"Damn." He jerked the receiver up and stabbing at the blinking button. "Blaisdell."

The voice came out of the murky recesses of his past, an element of his past that he wouldn't have missed never hearing from again. "You know the rules, Paul. You let your kid break them, and now he's paying for that. I'm going to tell you think once, and once only..."

Blaisdell's fingers ground into the plastic of the phone receiver, his knuckles white with tension. He didn't dare interrupt.

The disembodied voice continued, "Keep your boy away from me. I left him alive this time. I won't do it again. You and me... We're even now. The old debts are paid, Paul. You understand that? The next time, I don't pull my shot. The next time, he dies."

The line clicked. It took a few seconds for the signal of a dead connection to break through the silence. Paul didn't have up until the buzz of an open line sounded in his ear.

An acid-bath of nausea swept through his belly. They'd had the man right here in their holding cell, and it had never occurred to Paul to take a look at him himself. It might not have mattered; there were always ways to alter a man's identity and facial features, especially when money was no barrier. With this man, money would never have been a problem. The name Edmund Graham hadn't meant anything to Blaisdell; but, of course, there was no end to aliases.

It had only been a few hours since Peter had been raising hell at Brunetti's station. That much couldn't have happened in that short a time. The reassurances fell like broken-winged birds around him. The man now calling himself Graham didn't make mistakes. It had been his hallmark in the Agency. He didn't make mistakes, and he didn't leave witnesses. If Peter had crossed him and was still alive, it was only because Graham had chosen not to kill him.

Paul bolted up to his feet, one hand searching through the right-hand drawer of his desk. His fingers closed on the leather holster and he drew the Walther out. The leather was warm in his palm, its cargo of burnished steel nested into the pouch. How long had it been since he'd drawn the gun out with any intention of actually using it? His mouth set in a grim line as he positioned the shoulder holster and snapped it into place.

No one...no one hurt one of his children.

A blur of brown motion in the outer squad room caught his eye, and Paul had a moment's guilty twitch as he finished positioning the gun. He shrugged the feeling off and remained standing behind his desk as the Shaolin priest crossed the room and headed toward the small office.

Caine slipped inside and gently pulled the office door shut behind him.

He inclined his head, a modified bow to the police captain, and said, "Our son is in danger. We must go to him."

"How did you--? Never mind, it doesn't matter. We'll go now." Paul pulled his coat off the hook behind his desk and draped it over his shoulders. A Shaolin priest had never been his back-up before. Should be interesting.

* * * * *

"Nick can fly."

Peter coughed, and Jack nearly missed the slurred words. The cough died out into a weak, choking spasm, and Peter tried again. "Did you know... Nick... he flies."

The brown eyes were filmed with a glaze of confusion, and Jack estimated that anything he said wasn't going to penetrate that particular fog, so he gave in to the temptation. "Yeah, I know, kid," he agreed with a smile and a tiny, perverse pleasure in finally being able to admit it to someone else.

Peter nodded solemnly, then licked dry lips. "Just so you know," he mumbled, sinking back into the cushion of mounded pillows.

Jack grinned as he swabbed at the entry wound and got no reaction to the probe. "You're flying kinda high yourself right now, aren't you, Peter?" he suggested.

"Scared o' heights," the young cop mumbled. "Not a bird. No matter what my dad says. Can't..."

Ignoring the drug-induced nonsense, other than to wonder briefly what the kid thought he was saying, Jack cleaned the injury site and applied topical antibiotics before covering the wound. He expected the exit wound to be more messy, and he had wanted a well-advanced narcotic fog to work beneath. The young cop was far enough under now to start on the damage to his back. Jack glanced over his shoulder.

"Nick, come help me turn him--" His voice broke as the picture arced from his eyes to his mind.

Nick was leaning against the counter, his face pale and pasty. He was tipping back a dusky green bottle that wouldn't be listed in any vintage catalogue. Only then did Jack realize what kind of effect carrying Peter out of the hotel -- then being in the closed and cramped car with him -- would have on Knight. The bleeding had been profuse, and Nick's clothing was still stained with scarlet. It must be like being a drunk doused with one hundred eighty proof. Jack bit back his reactive comment and waited until Nick lowered the bottle.

Dark eyes met his, then dropped away. Nick plunked the bottle down on the counter, then visibly forced himself to face Jack squarely.

"Trust me," Nick said with a wry twist to a voice gone dry, "the alternative's a lot worse." He dragged in a long breath, cut a wary glance toward the shuttered windows that kept the rising sun at bay, then asked, "What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing," Jack said too quickly, then shook his head to clear away the curtness to his tone. Every once in a while he had a fleeting moment's realization about just what he was associating with here, and there was that infrequent but undeniable twinge of fear that pricked at his conscience. *Lie down with lions... or something like that...* Trust flooded back in, and there was only the tiniest trace of doubt to remind him that too much faith had always been one of Jack Brittington's worst flaws. He said, "Help me get him over on his stomach so I can clean the exit wound."

Nick nodded and managed not to give the abandoned bottle a wistful look as he crossed to the couch.

Peter clawed his way back to semi-consciousness, though, before they could shift his position, and Nick found himself with his hands full of weakly struggling, still bleeding cop.

"Got t' stop 'im," Peter protested, trying to push away the hands pinning him to the couch. "You can't -- he can't -- you got to--"

"Easy, Peter. Take it easy." Jack ran through his litany of useless reassurances. "You're fine. You're going to be fine, Peter. Just lie still and--"

Peter lunged forward; Jack tried to shift out of the way only to land in an ungainly heap on the floor beside the sofa as Nick caught the kid in his arms and used his own momentum to turn him. Half-conscious, Peter found himself suddenly face-down in the pillows, fighting against the instant panic of suffocation. Gently, but without releasing his hold, Nick turned his face, bringing with the motion the sweet relief of breathing. Peter choked and tried to tug his arms free, but the restraint held. Confused, lost in a wave of dizziness, he finally lay still, his eyes searching through the blur of his vision at the oddly shimmering face so close to his, dark eyes mirroring his own.

The scent of fear and blood was so heavy in Nick's nostrils that his stomach twisted in a wrenching agony of need. He swallowed against the flood of bile that rose to his throat, threatening to choke him. Peter's eyes met his, filtered beneath dark lashes, then focused on him with disturbing intensity. Nick fought down the hunger than churned within him and found a weak smile, dredging up a vapid reassurance.

"It's okay, Peter," he said, not quite able to shake the unnerving feeling that the kid was seeing more than his vacant stare indicated. "You're all right. We're on your side."

"Don't tell..." The words faded, were lost on a tide of nausea. Peter's already ashen face went a whiter shade of grey, but he fought to hold onto consciousness. "Please," he whispered with desperate strength. "You can't tell him."

Nick glanced up at Jack who shook his head and underlined his own lack of understanding with a shrug of one shoulder, then left Nick to deal with whatever the young cop was trying to get across to them. Jack's attention was single-mindedly redirected toward stopping the slow seepage of blood from the larger wound in Peter's back.

"Tell who?" Nick asked, as much to divert himself as to pull the kid's attention away from struggling against Brittington's probing fingers.

"My father."

"Don't tell your father?"

"I already died. You can't let that happen again. Not to him. Please."

Nick glanced up at Jack, saw the thought cross his friend's face, then vanish into a scowl and shake of his head. "I shot him full of pain killer," Jack said with a shrug.

Nick settled on the first thought that came into his mind. "We don't know your father, Peter. We can't tell him anything."

"Kay," Peter mumbled, apparently accepting the rest of the way into unconsciousness with a soft exhalation of breath.

* * * * *

"I need to..." Nick scratched his jaw, brushing his fingers with a betraying tremor over the harsh angle of his chin. "I need to go."

Jack glanced up from bandaging the gaping wound in Peter's lower back, noted the defined pallor on Nick's cheeks, and shook off his concern. Just what the hell did Knight think he was going to do with this kid?

"He needs to be in a hospital," Jack ventured.

"Can't." It was a dismissal punctuated by an impatient wave of one hand.

"What the hell do you mean *can't*?"

"I mean, the shooter was a pro. If he finds out he didn't kill Caine, he'll be back. You think a hospital staff or rent-a-cop is going to be able to protect him against a professional hitman?"

"You're a cop. You protect him."

"That's exactly what I'm doing," Nick retorted, letting his irritation wash through the words.

"That's why he's here. That's why you're here. There's no way to tie him to me. I don't know why Graham didn't do a better job of checking out his handiwork when he shot him, but I do know that the best thing we can do for Caine is to keep him here and keep him under wraps."

Nick dropped to a seat on the arm of the couch, glancing over at the kitchen bar and the lone bottle that waited there. Jack followed his line of sight and scowled. "You got other things to do than worry about that," he said. "This kid's life could very well depend on you keeping a clear head. Maybe you could exercise a little self-control."

The dark eyes that turned back to meet Jack's gaze were hard as flint and clouded with ill-disguised anger. "You have no idea what the hell you're talking about, Jack."

"I know what you're going through, Nick. I--"

"The hell you do!" Nick spun off the couch arm and started toward the kitchen, only to turn back in mid-stride to face his friend. "You try to understand, Jack, I know that. But there is no way in hell that you can. Maybe it's time you quit expecting more than I can give."

Jack's gaze didn't waver. "What about him?" He shrugged one shoulder. "You just going to write him off?"

"I did some checking by phone in the car while I was tailing him," Nick responded. "He's not only not here under police sanction, he's in direct violation of orders by coming down here. He walked into this with both eyes open. What makes you think I owe him anything? I don't even know him."

"If you feel that way, why did you follow him in the first place?"

"I thought I could keep him out of trouble. You can see what a great job I did with that."

"He's still alive," Jack pointed out.

"Not if he keeps dealing with this like he has been. I was told he's a good cop; he hasn't shown me anything to verify that."

"Why's he so determined to get this guy?"

It took Nick long enough to answer the question that Jack nearly repeated it before Knight said, "Killed his partner."

Jack nodded. "Has a familiar ring to it," he murmured.

"Yeah, well," Nick shrugged it off, "the way he's going, he's just gonna become another statistic for this guy to add onto his resume. He's here without sanction, and he's not willing to accept help until he takes a bullet. Doesn't sound promising, does it?"

"Yeah," Jack agreed, "sounds kinda like the way you work."

"At least I've got an edge when it comes to walking into bullets," Nick retorted. "I don't think he's got the same advantage."

"It's funny that he thinks he's already died once." Jack glanced up at Nick. "He's not--?"

"Like me? No. I could tell. Like you said, you got him pumped full of drugs. Gives you all kinds of weird ideas." Nick huffed out an impatient breath, rubbed his hand over his darkened jaw again, then said, "Look, you got it under control here, don't you? I've gotta get some rest. I'll relieve you tonight."

"You don't need that," Jack said quickly and it took Nick a moment to realize he was referring to the waiting bottle.

He couldn't quite keep the snarl out of his voice. I'll deal with what I need. You take care of him." Nick hesitated, then swiveled around on one heel and veered toward the kitchen. Without another word, he snagged the bottle, then headed up the stairs. Let Jack think what he would; the thirst was simply too gnawing to ignore with the scent of blood permeating the entire apartment.

* * * * *

Brunetti's terse directions had led Blaisdell and Caine to the rather unique quarters of Detective Knight. The police captain's phone call had been their admission ticket.

Good thing, Paul thought. *Or we could be outside all day trying to figure a way into this fortress.*

The fact that it was the local coroner who was letting them in wasn't so reassuring, but Paul shrugged that concern off at his first glance at his -- their -- son.

Peter was sprawled on the huge sofa, his face the color of ash. A dark blanket, pulled up to his chin, was a startling contrast to the pallor of his skin. His clothes, blood-stained and ruined, were piled on a bar stool next to the small, utilitarian kitchen, his gun, holster and badge carefully placed on top.

Paul's voice was a dry husk. "Where's Knight?"

Jack glanced involuntarily toward the stairs. "He's asleep. He works the night shift. He's... he's really worn out. I'd rather let him sleep." Brittington knew it sounded absurd to plead for Nick's undisturbed rest to these two men under the circumstances, but he really didn't have any idea what would happen if they tried to haul Nick out of bed during daylight. It was probably safe with the shuttered windows; still, he wasn't sure what to expect from rousing a cranky vampire during his sleep. Come to think of it, he mused sourly, he wasn't even sure what kind of sleeping accommodations were upstairs. For all he knew, Nick could be stretched out in a bona-fide coffin with his hands crossed over his chest. That would be a little difficult to explain.

"Asleep?" Blaisdell snorted, glancing back at the unconscious young detective on the couch. "Don't you think--?"

A hand placed gently on his arm halted the demand. Caine met Blaisdell's eyes and nodded. "It is, perhaps, best to let him rest," he suggested. "There will be much to do very soon."

"Look," Jack inserted quickly, "it's only an hour or so until nightfall. Why don't I fix some coffee, let Nick sleep a little longer, and then we can straighten this all out. Peter's okay. I've got him doped up, and the wound was a pretty clean in-and-out. He's not even going to know you're here for a while yet."

He was talking too fast, emphasizing his own reasonableness too heavily, but the two men seemed to buy it after a glance at each other. Paul started to step toward the couch, then caught the movement.

"I could use a cup of that coffee," he said and stepped aside in unspoken deference to the priest.

Caine nodded gravely at them both, then dropped to one knee beside the couch. Peter stirred but didn't wake at his first touch. Caine ran a large, calloused hand over the skin of his son's shoulder, testing for fever, finding only the natural heat of body warmth. Again, he sensed the alienness of the man who lived here, this time through contact with Peter's bare skin where he had been touched, restrained during the previous night. The 'feel' remained, lingering long past the contact, conjuring up images of long-dead Chinese folklore and stories recited at night to frighten children. It clouded the air around them with an oppressive, haunting weight.

His fingers traced a feather=light touch across the sharp planes of Peter's features, finally settling against his cheek as Caine cupped the well-loved face into the warm pocket of his palm.

Dark lashes flickered, then lifted. Peter's eyes were unfocused and glazed, but he found his father's face. "Pop..." His voice cracked with the effort to speak, and the fingers of his right hand fluttered as he tried to reach. Caine grasped the seeking hand into his own. "Pop, I can fly like a bird. I did it," Peter murmured.

"Yes, my son," Caine answered gently, not countering the words.

"he's been saying that all day," Jack offered from behind Caine. "He's been pretty out of it." By now he was wishing the kid would forget the idea. It was easily explained as shock or drug-induced nonsense, but if Peter didn't forget about it...

Peter's numb gaze found Paul who was standing behind his father, hovering, no longer able to maintain his distance, deference to the "real" father, be damned.

"Paul, I'm sorry... I know... I shouldn't..."

Paul reached down and ran one hand through already ruffled hair. "We'll get to the ass-chewing stage later when you're up to it, kiddo," he promised. "Right now, we need to get you to a hospital." He glanced back at Jack. "Nothing against your expertise, Doctor. I'd just feel a whole lot better if he was in a proper hospital rather than..."

"No hospital."

Nick's foot silently hit the last stair tread.

"You must be Knight," Paul countered.

"It's not safe to take him anywhere but here," Nick continued without acknowledging the comment.

Yep, Jack thought with a surge of sleep deprivation silliness, vampires wake up cranky just like the rest of us when we're gotten up too early.

"I suppose you've noticed that the man he keeps annoying is just a bit on the lethal side," Nick added. "And he's still out there. he's not gonna be real happy to find out that he didn't kill Peter when he had the chance."

The words were barely out of Nick's mouth when his restless gaze settled on Caine. He blanched, and his hand instinctively groped for the bannister. The priest became the center of his focus as the rest of the room darkened and faded, dropping off the edges of his vision with a sense of vertigo. hazel eyes bored into Nick's soul, inspecting, weighing his thoughts before he could conceal them. The distortion lasted only seconds, but Nick was breathless by the time the room shimmered back into clarity.

Caine spoke, his voice as light and airy as the tones of his flute. "That which you seek... you have never lost it."

The moment seemed to have been lost on Blaisdell. He stepped into the silence with, "He needs to be in a hospital."

With a wrenching effort, Nick dragged his eyes away from the Shaolin. "You're not listening to me. Graham's still out there. The kid's already walked into one bullet. You want to try for two?"

Paul shook his head. "It's safe now." He didn't bother explaining the enigmatic statement. *The priest isn't the only one who can talk in riddles*, he thought with a muffled grin.

Surprisingly, Cain was the one who challenged the flat statement. "Do you know this man?"

"Not really," Blaisdell lied, "but I know men like him."

"No," Peter countered, trying to push himself up on the couch. Caine instantly dropped to a seat beside him and held him down. Frustrated in his effort to sit up, Peter still had control of his mouth, and he forced out the accusation, "You do know this man. Don't you?"

Brushing a weary hand through his own hair, Paul turned away, then back. "Peter..." He faltered, then began again. "Peter, you know there are things I'm not free to discuss."

Peter lunged up again, his father's fingers splayed across his chest an effective block to the movement. He dropped back to the pillows, pale and gasping.

"You must rest, my son," Caine soothed.

"Pop, this bastard killed Mary Margaret. he's gonna get away with it."

"Revenge is never an honorable motive, Peter," Caine cautioned. "Nor is it worthy of Mary Margaret's memory. would you let her legacy be one of dishonor?"

"I'm not interested in Taoist bullshit right now, Father."

"Peter." Blaisdell's voice was lined with steel.

"I didn't mean that," Peter countered.

"I know, my son," Caine said. "You are confused and angry. Your heart wishes to grieve for her, and you will not allow it the time it needs until you have satisfied your vision of justice."

"He's killed before."

"Yes," Caine admitted.

"At the very least, he needs to be taken off the street. He needs to be arrested for her murder."

Paul stepped closer to the couch and squatted beside it, his joints tired and cramped from long hours in the car. He touched Peter's chin and turned his face so he could look into the glistening brown eyes. "Peter, you're compromising my position. Are you still willing to insist on this?"

Peter's eyes were liquid, the threat of tears very close now. He tried to answer, but no words came, only the lingering pain that lined his face.

"All right," Paul conceded. he looked up at Nick. "I want my... our son in a hospital. If you can arrange that, Detective Knight, I'll take care of the rest."

* * * * *

The corridors were still quiet.

Nick had strolled their silent lengths enough times by now that he knew each twist and turn by heart.

Hospital personnel had virtually deserted this particular section, and the silence was beginning to weigh on him.

Blaisdell was two flights above him, sitting in an uncomfortable chair beside his sleeping son. That had been a puzzle Nick had teased his mind with for a while until he had finally given up on the imponderable. Whose son the kid was didn't really matter, though it couldn't hurt to have your police captain as a father. Especially in the case of a hot-headed, rules-be-damned young cop.

The priest was another matter altogether. He gave Nick an unsettled feeling, a queasiness in the pit of his stomach which had to be a holdover from previous centuries. It had been a while since the mantle of priesthood had stirred up such a reaction in Knight. There was no threat there, though. Nick could tell that long before Caine had uttered his eerie benediction of absolution in the apartment.

Nick paced the hallway one more time, then decided to check the loading docks behind the morgue. He'd had all the time alone with his thoughts that he could bear for the moment. He turned and nearly collided with Kwai Chang Caine.

The priest had come up on him without a sound, with an unnatural lack of presence that had taken Nick completely off guard. He smiled, a gash of expression that didn't lighten his features. Perhaps they had more in common than at first glance.

"I did not mean to startle you," Caine said with a slight bow.

"You didn't," Nick countered truthfully. "I was just going to make a round outside. Anything going on upstairs?"

"Peter is asleep."

"Probably easier to handle that way," Nick said wryly.

"Sometimes."

"The captain seems to think this guy will make his move tonight." *Small talk*, Nick thought with a twist of humor, *between a vampire and a priest next to the morgue of the local hospital.*

"He is here," Cain said with a shrug of one shoulder.

Nick jerked around to face him. There was no sense of a third presence. "Here?"

Caine shrugged again. "Soon."

"You know this?"

Another shrug that didn't deny anything. Instead, the priest said, "I am grateful to you. You kept Peter from dying. Such a gift to a father is beyond measure."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't working too hard at saving his ass himself at the time. Someone had to do it."

"Nicholas."

Nick's dark eyes narrowed. The tone of voice had the dry husk of age and wisdom in it.

Caine spread his hands in a gesture of gentility and openness. "You could have taken what you needed from my son, but you saved his life instead. You must never doubt that your humanity is intact. You have never lost it."

There were no words to counter or agree. Nick simply shook his head and then said, "I'd better take a look outside."

"I will accompany you," Caine said softly.

"Don't you think you should be upstairs with Peter?"

"The time has come, Nicholas. He is here. Outside."

Without arguing, Nick slipped his gun from its holster and led the way down the darkened corridor past the closed doors of the morgue. Cold air seeped from around the hinges of the doors as they passed, a chill that worked its way up Nick's back.

The exterior doors were shut, but gave easily at Nick's touch. He stepped into the sheer blackness of the loading docks. A thousand yards away in the parking lot, street lamps gave off circles of light, but here, there were only darkness and the darker, hulking shapes of machinery and silent vehicles.

It took only seconds for Nick's eyes to adjust to the black and penetrate it. Still, the man was well hidden. If Nick hadn't had his peculiar advantages, he would never have located him. As it was, the priest stepped just beyond Knight's position before Nick could halt him.

"You do not need to cause any more death," Caine said, his words carried on the clear night air, words that were useless though only Nick and the silent assassin could know that for sure. "There is nothing to be gained by more pain."

"Caine!"

Nick's barked warning nearly came too late. The gunman, clad in black, slid out of the shadows, weapon in hand. Nick lunged forward with reactions that would have been the envy of any cat and flung himself in front of Caine at the same instant the gun discharged. He chuffed a breath of air as the bullet slammed into his chest.

His anger woke then. This man had murdered two L.A. cops as if they were cattle led to a slaughterhouse. He had killed another cop with enough brutality to send her partner on a tragic path of revenge. He had nearly taken Peter Caine's life as well. Enough.

Nick felt the transformation take place, twisting his face into a grotesque mask of rage and animal lust. His eyes glowed with their preternatural light. The scent of blood pulsing through his quarry mixed with the enticing odor of fear as the man raised his hands and backed away. It was probably the first time Graham had felt the clutch of terror wrenching his heart. It would be the last. He stumbled backward, the gun falling forgotten from his hand.

Another step would take him down. All Nick had to do was reach out...

It took more effort than he expected to quell the thirst and the need to rend and tear. With a physical wrench that dropped him to his knees, Nick fought off the transformation. He would not descend to that personal hell again, not for anyone. Certainly not for the terrified man who finally broke through the mesmerizing hold and turned to flee.

Graham stumbled once on the parking lot asphalt, then caught himself as he staggered into a circle of lamp light. A single, high-powered rifle shot clapped through the still air and Graham pirouetted within the ring of light, then collapsed like a puppet suddenly robbed of its strings. He lay still in the pool of light, a darker stain of crimson spreading and widening beneath his body.

Caine stepped forward and helped Nick to his feet. The priest reached for the black leather jacket, and Nick tried to push his hand away. "It's okay," Knight insisted too quickly.

With a scowl that halted the instinctive protest, Caine opened the jacket and placed his hand over the torn t-shirt where the bullet had broken through the skin. Tilting his head in a silent question, Caine smiled and closed the jacket without a word.

Nick cleared his throat. "We'd better go tell them it's all over," he suggested, relieved when the priest simply nodded.

* * * * *

"We can start with assaulting other officers, attacking prisoners, lying to anyone who would listen, misrepresenting yourself as a detective on the case..."

"I think I get the point, Captain," Peter tried to halt the flood of words being unleashed upon his helpless form. Maybe if he shifted against the pillows and look a little more pitiful.

"Give it up, kid," Paul interrupted himself. "It won't work. You've gotten yourself in so deep this time that you're not going to be out from under paperwork until your retirement party."

From his seat on the couch beneath the one window in the room -- a position of relative safety -- Caine laughed at the image of Peter doing paperwork for the next twenty years. It would never work. The kid would explode from suppressed energy long before he got a gold watch.

"Perhaps," Caine offered, "our son has learned something from this... adventure... and he will not be so quick to break rules in the future."

Paul snorted. "You ever hear the Sinatra song? 'Impossible Dream'?"

"Paul, I'm sorry. I kept seeing..." Peter's voice faded, choking on both the words and the images that still haunted him. "I keep seeing her. There was no reason. She shouldn't be dead."

"No," Blaisdell agreed gently. He sat on the edge of the bed and took Peter's hand in his own, unconsciously working his son's fingers the way he had often seen Caine do, massaging the tension out and filtering his own warmth into them. "No, she shouldn't, but you need to keep her memory clean of anything that would lessen her."

"You guys been hangin' out together, haven't you?" Peter accused.

Paul didn't deny it. He simply smiled and said, "There's worse company to keep."

"You're not going to tell me what happened, are you?"

With a weary sigh, Paul looked up from his hands and met Peter's steady gaze. "No, I'm not," he admitted.

"Okay, that's fair. Then I won't ask."

"You're learning."

"You wouldn't really put me on desk duty, would you? I mean, for longer than I have to be?"

"That's something we might have to--"

The litany of threats Paul had been saving up was cut short as Nick peered in through the doorway. "Visitors allowed?"

"Sure," Peter said too quickly, his relief at being spared -- at least temporarily -- hearing his sentence clear in his voice.

Knight nodded at Caine, then Paul, letting them know without words that everything was "cleaned up" and the previous nights' events had been shelved and properly catalogued. Out of sight, out of mind. New and more exciting news stories to capture the public's attention.

He stepped up to the bed. "Punched out any of the nurses, kid?" he asked lightly.

"What?"

Nick shrugged. "Well, you seem to have a thing about hitting public servants," he said. "Just thought I'd ask."

Peter squirmed against the pillows, not thrilled to have Paul reminded about his recent activities. He countered with his own question, "I don't suppose you can really fly?"

With a laugh, Nick asked, "What is it you think you remember, Peter?"

Wistfully, Peter said, "My dad used to try to get me to be like a bird back at the temple, but people can't fly. I always told him that."

"You're right, Peter, people can't fly, but they can always dream that they can," Nick suggested.

"Yeah," Peter sighed, his eyes heavy for the lure of returning sleep. "It sure was a good dream though."

* * * * *

The gloom that blanketed the room was temporarily by the opening of a door. The figure seated at the desk waited for the darkness to return before he looked away from the matching blackness outside the window. The office was huge, and the weak glow of a single lamp that burned at the far end of the room did little to illuminate the present center of the confrontation.

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to know why one of my people was terminated," the visitor stated quietly.

"It was deemed necessary."

"By whom?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"The waste of a valuable resource does concern me," was the blunt, angry response. He sat down and peered through the haze of shadows.

"Not this time."

"Who gave the order?"

"It came from the highest level. A request was made, and we responded."

"Who has that kind of pull?"

"That doesn't concern you either."

"You took out one of my field operatives. I think I deserve some kind of explanation."

"Your operative had gone rogue. He refused to follow orders, plus he was starting to show signs of unreliability. We contained the problem."

"I should have been notified." Already it had become a tiresome and futile litany. He knew there would be no answers.

"You were," was the short response. The tone implied their meeting was now adjourned.

"Who made the request?"

A heavy, measured pause, then came the surprise of a reply. "Blaisdell. Your man interfered with civil law enforcement. He presented a threat if taken into custody."

"I could have arranged--"

"Irrelevant at this point, wouldn't you say?"

The sardonic tone grated on his nerves, but he refused to take the bait. He rose from his chair and went to the door. Before he left, he glanced back at his superior. "Blaisdell's going to ask for too much one day."

The words, ominous and filled with undisguised antagonism, hung in the air long after the office was again home to a powerful, solitary presence.

IMMORTAL WEAKNESS

by Denyse M. Bridger

"LaCroix?"

The platinum head didn't turn, and she hesitated as she stared at him. He'd grown ever more distant over the past few days, had spoken less than a dozen sentences to her. They shared a house, had been lovers for months, yet he'd become a stranger to her.

The ancient vampire heard the confusion within her mind, and some part of him almost regretted the pain he knew his withdrawal had caused her. It had been nearly a year since he'd allowed thoughts of Nicholas to disrupt his life. A single year in so many centuries, yet one which haunted him. His most beloved child had tried to destroy him -- had almost succeeded. That act of rejection had created an alien compassion within the master. It was this new understanding which hurt for the lovely woman who'd offered him her life after he had accosted her in a lonely park.

He'd intended to feed and continue his hunt elsewhere. His thoughts had been alive with vengeance that night, he hadn't cared for anything -- especially the unfortunate mortal he'd chosen. Something in her pale grey eyes had transfixed him, stayed the death strike of his fangs. She knew what he was and showed no fear. If anything, she had shown him gentleness and it had appealed to him. For a time...

"You are a fool of the worst kind," the vampire hissed softly.

She smiled and nodded in perverse agreement.

"Inflicting on me the pain which torments your soul will not ease it," she whispered through a veil of tears.

"I have no soul."

"If that was true, you could feel nothing. And your face is alive with so many things."

He smiled, the expression a flutter of icy wind that caressed her and froze the warmth in her veins. He leaned into her, his mouth next to her ear. "My face is death," LaCroix murmured before he bent lower and stroked with his tongue the throbbing pulse of life in her neck. The shudder his touch created was satisfyingly intense.

"Death is a thing of beauty then," she replied.

The surprise of that answer stirred his curiosity.

"Death is painful and deceptive."

"Much like life," she challenged. "The eternal illusion of purity and hope."

The vampire looked closer at his proposed victim. She was far too young to be so jaded.

"Why illusion?" he wondered, interest piqued.

"How can something so fleeting be anything else?"

"Yet you cherish your life."

"I cherish what it might be, not what it is."

"And what might it be?"

"Shared."

LaCroix was amused by the simplicity of the answer. She waited for him to do what he would. He stepped from the shadows that surrounded them in the wooded city park, drew her into the pale brilliance of the moon's light. She was older than he had thought her to be, yet younger than women half her age. Innocence coupled with wisdom -- she was a paradox to one who seldom encountered such things.

"Do you wish to claim my life?"

The vampire laughed at her boldness.

"What is your name?"

"Lilith."

"Belonging to the night," he said with an expressively arched eyebrow.

"Has Destiny been met at last?" she questioned. Pale grey eyes captured the equally pale blue of his stare, and she felt herself falling beneath an ageless spell. She went willingly into his darkness. He chose not to take her.

"You wait every night." It had been this way for several weeks, he knew.

She didn't turn toward the softly resonant voice. Instead, she closed her eyes to the rain that fell like the tears of heaven, and she allowed the magic of his presence to fill her with awareness.

"We share a weakness."

LaCroix bristled at her audacity.

"I have no weakness that you could understand."

"Your heart betrays you."

His laughter was bitter and chilling. He held out his hand as she rose and faced him. Delicate, warm fingers curled around the pale iciness of his, and she gazed upward at him.

"I have wanted you from the moment I first saw you," she told him. "Whatever it is that makes you see me, I am willing to give to you."

"Your life?" he murmured.

"For a price," she acquiesced.

His eyes narrowed with ill-concealed anger. He bargained for nothing; what he wanted he took -- it had been this way for thousands of years. As it had during their first meeting, curiosity diminished his annoyance. He waited, and she took his other hand and held both limbs to her heart. The furiously pounding beat warmed his fingers, and he uncoiled her grip and slid his hands into the softness of long ash blonde hair. His thumbs caressed her jaw, and the quiver of her bottom lip was the only revelation of her awakened desire.

"What will you ask, Lilith?"

"I wish to stay with you," she swallowed hard as she watched amusement soften the shards of sapphire that were his eyes.

"You ask for a very dangerous union."

"If you will be my life and my death, LaCroix, you understand what that means to me."

"You assume I care what you want."

"If you didn't, you would never had left me alive that first night. You are not the monster you would have all believe."

He eyed her warily for several minutes.

"I am, Lilith," he assured her softly.

"You are more human than anyone I have allowed to touch me," she denied and stepped into his arms.

The rain had slowly eased to a gentle fall of warm drops. Stars had begun to glitter against the rich velvet of the night sky. There was a stillness around them, a sense of being somehow separated from the rest of the world. All that existed was the silver-haired vision of elegant death who stood before her. He was the most deceptively beautiful creature she had ever seen.

"I have not possessed humanity for an eternity," he whispered next to her ear.

"Then loneliness is an immortal weakness, too," she concluded as she drew his head down to meet her kiss.

Her fate was sealed with the first brush of his lips...

"LaCroix?"

She had crossed the room and dropped to her knees in front of him. He finally deigned to look at her, the chill in his eyes a reflection of scorn and rage. The expression, so unexpected, made her cringe. She would have risen and left him, but LaCroix's hands took her wrists in a grip that threatened to crush them.

"What have I done that has angered you?"

"I dislike weakness, Lilith," he told her, his softly accented voice terrifying in its gentleness. "I prefer Nicholas' defiance to your servile devotion. You sicken me."

She watched in mute heartbreak as the masque of his smile became the contemptuous wrath she had never thought to incur. His first words to her rose from memory, echoed in her mind: *You are a fool of the worst kind.*

"I loved you," she said quietly.

"I know," he laughed coldly. "Your *human* weakness has destroyed you."

"As your immortal weakness will damn you for the eternity of your existence," she spat back.

"Then I will enjoy myself before I meet my fate, Lilith."

She heard the sensual threat in his voice, the tiny change in the rich tone that warned her in the moment before he pinned her to the floor beneath him.

LaCroix's rape was complete; he took her to the edge of madness as he linked his thoughts to hers and flooded her mind with lifetimes of bloodshed and lust. Her screams were exhilarating, and as he drew her to her final death, he felt his own life wake within him. He had permitted a weakness he would never again accept under any circumstances.

The vampire rose, stepped over the corpse that had been his lover, and collected his scattered cloths. Hunger, true hunger, gnawed his insides, and he was once again prepared to claim his dominion. First he would satisfy his Thirst, then he had an appointment to keep. One that was long overdue...

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LIGHT WITHIN DARKNESS

by Denyses M. Bridger

Light within Darkness
He is evil
In the guise of beauty
I want to turn from his presence
I am trapped
Ensnared by a monster
Transfixed
He is the night
I crave the day
You lie
He knows
I want to die in his presence
I am trapped
Enchanted by my destruction
Adoring
He is my fear
As I am his
Light with Darkness

SEDUCTION'S FIRE

by Todd Parrish

The *Raven's* music throbbed like the beating of a heart. The bass resonated, pulsing, as if the rock and roll itself was alive. Facing away from the myriad of bottled liquors, Janette leaned against the hard surface of the bar. With one leg arched delicately back, her high heel dug into the wood. Scanning the club with acute vision, she examined her customers: bodies were clad in black leather, chains, and wild hairstyles. *Just mundane mortals*, she thought, taking a drag on one of her cigarillos. She exhaled the smoke with a hiss.

She turned around, facing the bartender. "The usual," she stated in a bored, yet sultry voice. Seating herself on a tall barstool, she perched there like a bird of prey until the bartender handed her a drink.

She brought the wine to her lips but paused momentarily. Her feline eyes were reflected in the red liquid. She could smell it laced deceptively in the wine. A mortal might not discern the tang of it, attributing it to the vintage perhaps. However, with Janette's vampiric senses, she could smell the blood. Its scent wafted to her nostrils with voracious familiarity. She sipped. Her tongue tingled, came alive as she swallowed. She suddenly realized how hungry she was. Her stomach pained her. She set the glass down with irritation.

"Is everything to your satisfaction?" asked the bartender, noticing her mood change.

"Yes, fine." Her dark eyes glowed. She turned away, hiding them from her patrons. *It's not the same. The wine tastes like swill compared to fresh blood. I'm sick of it. I want to feel the warm saltiness to rush down my throat again... Now, Janette, control yourself. You don't want to get reckless and cause any undue attention... You never know who might be watching. The kills aren't as easy as they used to be. Nothing is as simple as it used to be. Not in this century.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a flash of white which she caught from the corner of her eye. It was his tight 501's that she noticed first. Snowy-white, they hugged to his body like a glove. Her eyes caressed the black leather of his cowboy boots, ran up his legs to the tight buttocks. He was wearing a red silk shirt. Blond hair cascaded like a waterfall down his back. Her breath caught in her throat as he turned to face her, a beer in his hand. Sapphire eyes flashed in the strobe lights as he swept his gaze over the dance floor, seemingly looking for someone. Janette knew in the same instant what he was looking for. Sex. The raw power of the thought hit her between the eyes, making her giddy for a moment.

Ah, mon cherie... Come to me, my sweet, and I'll satisfy you like no other woman, she thought, stepping forward and almost instantaneously was standing next to him.

"I couldn't help but notice you," smiled Janette. She figured the direct approach would suit her best. His thoughts clearly said he wanted to get down to business.

"*Bono suerte*," he smiled back to her with a row of pearly-whites. "I'm Giovanni," he introduced in a thick Italian accent.

"Mmm... Italian. I love Italian men." Janette ran her fingers down his chest unabashedly. She knew he wanted her to do it. She knew what he liked.

"You're very... how do you say? Sure of yourself?" He grinned. His square jaw became more prominent.

"Very sure. I can give you what you need. What do you say?"

"You speak the truth," returned Giovanni, admiring the dark allure of his companion. Janette's dress was as tight as his jeans, revealing the swell of her breasts and her tiny waist. Perhaps she was dressed a bit too trendy, but Janette possessed a timeless beauty which she had used well to her advantage over the ages.

"I have a place we can go to..." Giovanni said in a low voice.

"Lead on, *cherie*," said Janette, taking the blonde's arm.

Janette was attracted not so much by the physical attributes of the man, but it was the smell of his blood that aroused her. The soapiness of the skin, the slight muskiness of his underarms, and the sweetness

of his break mixed with the heady aroma of his blood. She *needed* to drink from his neck. It was if he was surrounded by an aura of intoxicating cologne. She pressed herself against his chest and inhaled. *It has been so long since you have had blood like this, Janette. When was the last time? What was her name... blood like nectar? Sarah Fergus. She was the little musician Nicholas had taken such a fancy to that night in the inn so long ago. I snatched the treat right from his hands. LaCroix didn't want me to, though he didn't let on to Nicholas. It was I who desired her. John Underwood had taken the blame, but dear Nicholas wouldn't allow him to hang...*

A woman tried to stop them from leaving the Raven. "Don't do this," warned Holly, grabbing Janette's arm.

"Get out of the way," she responded and pushed past her.

Holly watched the two depart and knew there was going to be trouble. Janette seemed possessed as if her reason had left her. The blood lust did that sometimes. It was a thing which could not be denied. Being seen with one's victim was stupid. Holly had never known her mistress to be foolish.

I hope she knows what she's doing, she thought and returned to waiting tables. The striking couple had already left the dance club.

* * * * *

They reached the seedy hotel in no time. Janette thought she would go mad with the smell of him. *Not yet. No one must see.*

She could have taken him to some dark corner and sucked him dry just like she did Sarah Fergus. But she didn't want that. She wanted to collect his nectar slowly, relishing every second of his potent blood.

Giovanni kicked the door of the motel room open with one of his pointed boots. "Home sweet home," he growled.

Janette laughed as she took the scene in before her. The room was a mess. Old pizza boxes, beer cans, discarded underwear, and popcorn littered the floor. The bed was a rumpled heap. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"You could say that I am 'hanging out' here for a while."

"Whatever," she breathed, ignoring the door behind her which did not catch.

Janette began to unbutton Giovanni's shirt slowly. As the buttons came undone, she spied the thatch of downy blonde chest hair. His skin had a dark, golden tan. *When the last time your skin was kissed by the sun?* Janette tried to recall. What had it felt like when she had been mortal? She couldn't remember. The sun was supposed to be warm and inviting, but those memories were clouded by all the centuries of fear. To vicariously experience it once again, but stroking Giovanni's naked chest, felt wonderful.

She kissed his mouth. How soft his lips! She felt the scratchy stubble on his face. Her tongue darted out, licking his chin. "Come," she commanded softly, taking him by the hand and leading him to the bed. Giovanni followed her willingly with a grin on his face.

She pushed him down onto the mattress. Giovanni lay flat on his back. Janette straddled his body, sitting on his pelvis.

"A woman who knows what she likes," he chuckled.

So beautiful and yet so innocent.

"You have no idea," sighed Janette. She pinned his wrists behind his head with such force that it surprised the cocky Italian.

"*Si!* You like to play rough..." said Giovanni, but his words ended in a startled gasp. Janette's eyes suddenly became inhuman. A wild, yellow glow lit them from within. Her red lips drew back in a snarl, revealing sharp incisors.

In an instant, her fangs dug into his neck. Giovanni whimpered, then moaned in ecstasy as the life was drained from him.

* * * * *

"You won't believe who's in the captain's office," said Detective Schanke, taking a sip from his coffee cup with a loud slurp.

"Okay, who?" inquired Nick Knight, walking over to his desk.

"Fiorello Centanaro," announced Schanke, following Nick.

"Centanaro... that name sounds familiar." Recognition crossed Knight's pale face. "He's a mafia king pin, isn't he?"

"You got it. He's with Stonetree right now. Seems that someone murdered his son last night. Get this, there wasn't a mark on him except two puncture wounds in his throat."

"What?" Nick snapped, his full attention now on his partner.

"Yeah, his kid didn't have a drop of blood in him. Probably some other crime family trying to leave Centanaro a message."

"Where's the body?" said Nick, standing up straight.

"Natalie's got him. Hey, Nick..." Schanke called after the other detective who seemed to vanish right before his eyes.

* * * * *

"No doubt about it," stated Natalie Lambert, turning Giovanni Centanaro's head to the side. "By the looks of it, now I know such things are possible, a vampire killed him." The corpse's face lolled back, exposing the two ugly puncture wounds. The once robust man's body was now laid on the morgue's examination table like a dried husk.

"Are you sure?" Nick asked, not wanting to believe it. He'd seen these wounds thousands of times over in his eight centuries living as a creature of the night. Every time he saw a corpse like this, he felt deeply responsible. It pricked at him in a way in which only someone intimately acquainted with death could understand.

"I don't need to tell you, Nick. But the teeth marks are too close together. Most likely your suspect is female." Natalie gazed at the wan detective. Her news registered shock in his face. "Anybody you know?" inquired the pathologist.

"I hope not." Nick was perplexed. Why would a vampire be so foolish as to leave a body in this state? It was an unwritten law that all bodies must be disposed of, never to be found. No evidence of the existence of vampires must be discovered, else the Enforcers would sense something amiss. Nick smelled trouble.

"Well... what are you going to tell the captain -- that a vampire killed Giovanni Centanaro?"

"I don't know," Nick brooded.

"Come on, Nick. You don't look well. I have a little treat for you." The attractive woman opened the lab fridge, grabbing a beaker containing a green liquid.

"Not again. Yuck!" Nick hated the synthetic protein drinks his companion always tried to get him to drink.

"It's either this or the blood. You know it's the blood that keeps you from being human. *Drink!*" Natalie commanded, shoving the glass into his hand.

Nick pulled a face.

* * * * *

"Nick, we need to find the killer before Centanaro does. Actually, in this case, he might do us a favor by getting that trash off the street. But the law is the law. We must do everything to catch the suspect and protect her from being killed," said Captain Stonetree.

"Any leads yet?" Nick had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach; he fidgeted in the hard-back chair.

"Well, it seems that a prostitute, on her way back to the Dreamland Motel with her trick, said that she heard growls coming out of the next room. Apparently, the door was ajar, so she peeked inside. Said that she saw a woman and a man involved in a pretty kinky scene."

"Did she see the woman?"

"Not very well. Says she was dressed in black like she was going out. Said she had dark hair done up on top of her head. The rest was all pretty weird."

"What happened?"

"She was probably on drugs. Said the suspect's eyes glowed like the devil's. She screamed. Wodzinski and Bell were staking the place out for a major cocaine bust. They heard the prostitute's screams, but by the time they made it up the second floor where Centanaro's room was, the suspect had already fled the scene."

"Any information on the identity of this woman?"

"Not yet. Centanaro didn't have a car. Wherever they came from must have been within walking distance. The suspect was wearing evening clothes so you might check some of the clubs nearby. What's the name of that swank nightclub?"

"The *Raven*. I'll begin there," hesitated Nick. "I don't get it, though. What was the son of a Mafia king doing in that run-down motel?"

"Seems his father had him educated in Italy. His son came back to see his father in America. While he was here, he was sowing his wild oats, so to speak. What a way to go," whistled Stonetree.

"Yeah." Knight cleared his throat. "What a way to go."

* * * * *

Nick made his way through the dark maze of dancing humans to the back of the club. He scanned the room, looking for Janette. Maybe one of her vampire guests at the club was responsible for the death of Centanaro. Janette was not in her usual place by the bar.

"Where's Janette?" he asked Holly. The blonde took the cocktails from her tray and set them on the table in front of two punks.

Her expression of unreadable. "She's not available."

"What?" Nick was taken back. What was Holly hiding? He tried to touch her mind, but found that it was closed to him. Janette had been very effective in teaching her fledgling.

Digging in his leather jacket, he fished out a photograph of Giovanni Centanaro. "Ever see this man before?" he asked her, holding it in front of her face.

"A lot of people come in here," she hedged.

"Come on, Holly. This is me you're talking to. He was killed last night by one of us. He'd been to all the bars in downtown. Surely you'd remember a man like this coming in here."

"I suppose..." A look of fear crossed her face -- or what looked like fear. Nick couldn't tell. "You'd better talk to Janette. She's below." Holly turned her back and went to the bar, ordering some more drinks.

"What in hell?" swore Nick under his breath and in an instant, he was down in the cellar, listening for Janette's signature heartbeat. It was a strong, old heart.

"I knew you'd come looking for me," she whispered in the darkness of a room under the stairwell. Her eyes glowed faintly.

"Why aren't you with your clientele?" It wasn't like Janette to hide herself away from the living. Although she found mortals weak, she loved their clothes, their hairstyles, and music. She needed mortals not only for their blood, but for their company.

"Don't you know, *Nicholas*?" Her voice was quiet.

And he did. In the eight centuries he'd known Janette, he'd come to understand her ways. She'd been the woman who'd sucked Centanaro dry. Hiding out was her way of letting things blow over until she could rejoin the living. She retreated from the world when she felt endangered. This was one of the reasons why LaCroix wielded such power over her. She needed someone to protect her when things got sticky. At least that was the way she used to be. She'd grown much more independent in time.

"It was you, *wasn't it*?" The question was more of a statement.

"Why not me, Nicholas? I needed his blood! I sense you've seen his body. Could you not smell the sweetness about him?"

"Damn you!" he hissed, wanting to strangle her or sink his own fangs into her throat.

"Don't thrust your morals, your humanity, on me!" she spat.

"I am a cop. My job is to protect these people. Why were you so sloppy by leaving the body there? Even you should have understood that."

"That tart next door saw me. I knew that your policemen were on their way up. Don't chastise me. *You're one of us.* You can't deny that. Oh, how good he tasted, Nicholas. His blood reminded me so much of your pretty musician... Sarah Fergus."

Anger was replaced by guilt. LaCroix knew that Sarah intrigued him, but not only for her music ability. Nick wanted to believe it was her goodness which drew him. Or, at least that it was what he thought. Not so. It was her blood which enraptured him. The smell of it was like an opiate. He wanted to take her, sink his fangs into her neck. It was Janette who killed her, luring her to a dark corner and draining her dry.

"Why do you say these things to torment me!" he roared. Stray plaster fell from the ceiling.

"You smelled her blood, didn't you? I know what you really wanted, Nicholas. Can't you understand how long it has been since I drank blood like hers? It was the blood lust. I needed it!"

"He was innocent!"

"Just like your ballet dancer. The flower you plucked just after it came into bloom?" Janette put her hands on her hips, indignant.

"I remember. I was tricked. LaCroix led me to believe she was a whore!"

"But you wanted to. Didn't you, Nicholas? You relished her blood running down your throat." She smirked, daring him to deny it.

"Why are you doing this? Why do you throw what I am in my face to justify your acts?" Nick pressed his palms against his eyes, symbolically blocking out painful memories.

Janette did not answer. Had she grown so insensitive under LaCroix's teachings? She knew how to hurt him and evade blame. He was as guilty as she. He'd done the most vilest of things. She had learned to bait Nick expertly into doing them. Somehow making him suffer for his crimes assuaged her own; old habits were hard to break. Damn him! Why was he trying to make her feel guilty for what she did? Guilt had no place in their lives. It was dangerous; it could easily destroy a person. Janette repressed that emotion nearly eighty years after she'd been turned. Still, regret weighed her soul down, sometimes making her feel as ancient as her years.

Silence lasted for what seemed like hours. Her skirt rustled faintly as she sat down on a chair and lit up a cigarette.

"I am afraid, Nicholas." Her statement stunned him. It had been a long time since he'd heard her admit that. She'd tried to hid her fears by galling him. It was her way of reminding him of his dark past and not to judge her too harshly for her foolishness.

"You know who he was?" Knight asked.

"Centanaro's son." Janette paused momentarily, avoiding Nick's gaze. *He was so beautiful. What a wondrous vampire he would have made had I the time to make him one of us. Not since Holly have a turned a human. What a waste.* She sighed. "One of his men came here asking questions. Of course, none of our people said anything. But I cannot be too sure how much they know. That business in Chicago was very nasty -- remember, Nicholas? If you hadn't been there, I don't know what I would have done. Even mortals not knowing what we are, but seeking our deaths can be very dangerous.

His anger and guilt were forgotten; he wanted to protect his old friend. He recalled all the times LaCroix had used her body and soul. It must have had an effect on her. LaCroix's legacy had haunted him in life, and now as well in death. Although he was free of his master, it was difficult to try a new way of living. Janette deserved a chance to change as well. *She did kill him, but perhaps she is not totally responsible for Centanaro's death.*

"You've got to get out of here, Janette."

"I know. I was trying to think of where to go next. It's not like me to be so uncertain. I don't want to leave here." She shook her head. "What if they come after me?"

Nick responded automatically. "Stay with me tonight." He did love her; he would protect her. How could he not? They had shared centuries of close intimacy.

"Thank you," she whispered. Could he see tears in her ancient eyes? Nick wasn't sure, but still it moved him.

"I must tell you something so you don't think so badly of me... That night at the Inn all those centuries ago... LaCroix starved and beat me after I killed Sarah Fergus. He didn't want me to kill her. He

wanted you to do it. He told me it was just a matter of time before you succumbed. He commanded me to slip away with her outside. There, I was to tempt you to take her. I was torn. I wanted her blood. I was afraid of LaCroix. But I didn't want you to do it. I knew that another death on your hands would crush your spirit. So I killed her. Perhaps you thought I weak, letting him control me for so long..." She leveled her gaze directly on his. "It was one of the few times I disobeyed him."

"I understand," said Nick with humility. Despite all, Nick realized why he gave his protection. Selfish by nature, he suspected that Janette did have the capability to care.

The two companions exited from the back entrance. In minutes, they flew like the wind across the starry Ontario sky to Nick's modern fortress.

* * * * *

"Get up, Janette!" Nick's shrill whisper woke her from the slumber of the grave just as the sun was setting. Knight's apartment was dark, the blinds down. However, the vampiress innately sensed the time of day.

"What is it?" she complained, rolling over on Nick's soft leather couch. "It's barely sunset."

"Something is wrong. Can you not feel it?"

Janette brushed back a stray strand of hair. She listened, but did not hear anything. She sniffed. What was it? Yes. Smoke.

"I have a terrible feeling... I must get back to the *Raven*. Something is not right." Janette stood bolt upright.

"We can't go out there yet. It's at least a half an hour until it is safe."

"I can't wait. *Nicholas, help me!*" she pleaded.

Nick could see her desperation. From the closet, he pulled out two large black trench coats. Two black hats, scarves, and sunglasses followed. "We'll take my car. It's not safe to fly."

Janette did not argue but donned the coat swiftly. Twenty minutes later, the two were in downtown Toronto.

* * * * *

"My God! Look at the sky!" Janette choked out. Black clouds mushroomed high over the city, visible for miles around. Nick pushed heavily on the accelerator. He felt as if he was sweating in the dim sunlight, or was it that his flesh was beginning to catch fire?

On a side street to Front, he pulled the car over. Janette gave a small cry of disbelief. The old brick building which housed the *Raven* was engulfed in flames. The vampiress pulled the sunglasses from her face the cried out with pain. She put them back on, half-blinded. Even with half-vision, she could tell her establishment was ruined.

"Stay here!" commanded Nick. This time he did see tears running down Janette's cheeks.

Janette was too stunned to move. So many tragedies in her unnatural lifetime. She'd seen friends die and lovers turned to dust. The *Raven*, her connection to vampires and humans alike, seemed immortal as she. At least she'd wanted it to be. The blackened hull being consumed by flames turned out mortal as any friend she'd ever known. *Except for Nick*, she thought gratefully.

The sun was nearly down, yet Nick pulled his collar up over his neck. Ashes drifted down like black snowflakes, sticking in his hair. The sound of sirens nearly deafened him. Fire trucks blocked what used to be the *Raven's* entrance. Firemen in yellow uniforms rushed back and forth with axes or fire hoses. The burning rafters inside the building hissed as jets of water were hurled upwards from the high pressure hoses.

Knight spied Schanke's car. The attachable red light on the roof was blinking blood-red. His partner was barking into his walkie-talkie. Seeing his Nick, Schanke said, "Uh, yeah, that's a ten-four."

The paramedics arrived in the same moment. "Over here!" shouted a fireman. Two uniformed men rushed from the ambulance with a stretcher. From where he stood, Nick could see the charred body of a woman lying on the blacktop yards from the building. The paramedics checked her vital signs and commenced CPR. The smell of charred flesh wafted to Nick's nose, sickening him, making him hungry. A patch of ebony hair flew in the breeze; the rest of her was unrecognizable.

"Over here," Schanke motioned Nick. "Surprised to see you up so early." Knight stood before him, his expression clearly demanding an explanation.

Seeing the *Raven* destroyed was dumbfounding. "Who started the fire?" he asked.

A doctor arrived on the scene, and in minutes pronounced the woman dead. The paramedics covered her face with a white sheet and carried her to the ambulance.

Schanke waited to answer the question until the medics had driven off. "We're not sure. Sources tell us Centanaro was tipped his son was last seen at the *Raven*. My guess is his men couldn't find out anything definite, so they torched the place as an example."

"And the woman?"

Schanke paled and cleared his throat. "We think it might be Janette. Hers was the only body discovered. I'm sorry."

"What?" Nick's mouth snapped shut. What was going on here? He'd just left Janette minutes ago. For a moment, he actually believed Schanke. He thought he might vomit, something he hadn't done in centuries. No, it couldn't had been her. She was in the car. He felt dizzy. *It could have been her though*, he thought as he leaned heavily on the car.

"Uh, Nick... if there is anything I can do," mumbled his partner.

"I'll be fine." He suddenly felt like laughing with relief.

* * * * *

Janette screamed as a fist crashed through the car window, sending shards of glass into her face and lap. An iron-like hand gripped her throat, crushing her windpipe. *I can't breathe!* her mind shrieked. *Janette, calm yourself. You don't need to breathe.*

A vampire she recognized from centuries past loomed over her. Face pale, the eyes stupid and vacant, her assailant's breath smelled like pig feces. "PUNISHMENT, JANETTE!" the monster growled through oversized fangs. By her neck, he physically lifted her off the car seat and shook her, crunching her esophagus. In the next instant, he was gone. Janette clawed at her throat, gasping for air. Dark droplets of blood ran down her face where the glass had cut her. She lay down on the car seat, waiting for her unnatural body to begin to heal itself.

Nick returned to the car and knelt over her. "What's wrong, Janette?" he demanded.

"Drive..." she managed to wheeze.

Nick needed no prompting. He knew when to flee. Turning the key in the accelerator, his vintage automobile roared to life. Janette lay on the seat, her hands still on her throat. Nick raced from the scene.

* * * * *

In his apartment not even an hour later, Janette fully recovered. Nick handed her one of his bottles of animal blood. She frowned but drank anyway.

"You've got to get out of here." Nick feared he would slaughter anybody who threatened Janette, despite his profession as a law officer. He found it more difficult to kill, but these criminals might prove an exception.

"The Enforcers meant to punish me, not kill me. They left that other mortal in my place... After all, we're *family*." She gave Nick a sour smile.

"They might have actually done you a favor." He remembered the poor young photographer whom they killed to erase evidence of LaCroix's exploits on the battlefield during the Civil War. It was hard to think of the Enforcers as benefactors. However, that they not been so ruthless, the existence of vampires might have been discovered long ago. "I hope Centanaro's do believe the body was yours. Perhaps Natalie can help corroborate its identity. She owes me a big favor. If Centanaro ever discovered you had been seen with Giovanni, I don't know how many of them we'd have to kill before you'd really be safe."

"Oh, yes! Thank the Enforcers!" spat Janette. "Still, you are right, Nicholas."

"You won't be able to use the bank accounts under your name. If you do, they'll know you're alive."

Janette giggled. "In a manner of speaking." Then her eyes grew sad. "I have plenty of money under many names. I am a rich woman. One of the small pleasures of our existence. I'll let you know if I need any."

Nick nodded. "Where will you go?" He already missed her. He'd lost many friends, but this one was especially painful. Having Janette near him made the loneliness go away.

"Back to Avignon. It's been nearly a hundred years since I've been to France." A faraway look crossed her face.

"I will miss you, old friend," Nick said, kissing her lips.

She smiled, running her fingers through his hair. "Oh, don't fret, Nicholas. What a couple of decades when you have an eternity?" She then lit up one of her long cigarillos with a new confidence. And somehow, Nick knew that she would be just fine.

SIREN-SONG

by Denyse M. Bridger

My search for you
 led me through time itself.
Past countless souls,
 who might have offered my joy.
I saw none who loved me,
 only the emptiness of what I lacked.
I waited and knew,
 that one life would soon lead to others.
My search for you
 gave me the strength to endure,
The endless years
 required to grasp recognition.
I saw none who desired me,
 only the spectre of an unknown lover.
I waited and hoped,
 that one day you would lay claim.
My search for you
 led me into the night.
Past countless souls,
 who might have saved me from you.
I saw none who loved me,
 only the promise of eternal passion.
I waited and knew,
 that I'd always be yours.
I tried to fight your possession,
 refused the surrender my heart demanded.
You became my obsession,
 the madness that rules my existence.
My search for you,
 led me through time itself.
You offered eternity
 all I want is your love.

SNAP JUDGMENT

by Maddog

with extra special help from Joyce Riffle

"You sure you're gonna need me on this one, Mac?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, Richie. I'll need you to drive a truck back if we pick up anything big," Duncan MacLeod replied. He regarded the young man in front of him. Richie Ryan had been living with him and Tessa for nearly a year. During that time, he'd watched the former thief and street punk change into a responsible person and friend. Lately though, Duncan reflected, Richie had been distant, moody -- one minute joking and smart-ass, the next aloof.

"Okay, whatever," Richie agreed with a shrug. "When do we leave?"

"The flight's tomorrow morning at seven."

"A.M.?" Richie looked at his boss with widening eyes and shook his head in mock disgust. "That's gotta be against some labor law, I just know it."

"Just be ready," Mac grinned back and went to find Tessa to tell her of their plans. He walked through the large antique shop to the back workshop where Tessa spent her time creating. His nostrils picked up the scent of the welder, and he checked to see if she had flipped the warning sign. The "Warning Welding" sign wasn't visible, so he entered the room.

After fifteen years, she was as beautiful as the day they had met on that sill tour boat in Paris. The tall blonde was deep in thought, sketching out a new design. Duncan came up behind her and rested his hands lightly on her shoulders.

Tessa jumped, started, and swung her head around quickly to see Duncan grinning at her. She swatted at him. "Don't do that! You startled me!"

"Sorry," the Scotsman replied, his tone making it very clear that he was not sorry in the least.

"No, you're not. After four hundred years, you should know better than to scare people," she scolded, her French accent even more pronounced than usual.

"Let me make it up to you," MacLeod purred, drawing Tessa close to him, kissing her. Duncan MacLeod was tall with dark brown eyes and hair, currently pulled back into a pony tail. Despite the fact that he had lived in many places during his long lifetime, his Scottish burr had never quite faded away. It was especially prominent, Tessa had informed him, when he was nuzzling her neck.

The Frenchwoman enjoyed the embrace, then pulled away. "Later, Duncan, I have to finish this before we leave the city. Did you get the flight time?"

"Yeah, we leave for Toronto on a seven a.m. flight. The Canadian Antique Dealers Festival doesn't start until noon, so we'll have plenty of time to get settle before it opens."

"That's good," Tessa replied and then broached a subject she'd been avoiding for the past week. "Is Richie coming with us then?"

"Yeah," Duncan replied, then he noticed Tessa's apprehensive air. "Is something wrong? Did you and Richie argue about something?"

"No, Duncan, nothing like that," she assured him. "It's just that I was thinking that maybe Richie needs to spend some time alone."

"Why? Has he said anything?"

"No," Tessa shook her head slightly and began tidying up her work area. This subject made her uncomfortable. Mac was so fond of Richie, it made him oblivious to the obvious sometimes.

"Then what?" MacLeod prompted.

"The way he's been acting lately -- temperamental, staying out all night. I think he needs to work some things out for himself."

"I've tried to talk to him."

"I know you have, Duncan, but sometimes when you're Richie's age, you have to deal with things by yourself."

"We're his friends, Tessa," Duncan replies, puzzled. He was unsure where she was going with the conversation. Richie was just going through a rough patch. The boy had come so far so quickly.

Looking up from the tools she was stashing, Tessa relied, "Yes, but we can't live his life for him."

Considering Tessa's words for a moment before replying, Duncan finally responded, "Are you saying you think it would be best for him to leave us?"

"No, not necessarily. Richie and I have had our differences, but I care for him. It is just that lately he is difficult to be around." Shaking her head for a moment, trying to find the right words, she continued, "I suppose I don't know exactly what I'm trying to say, only that his leaving us is something we should consider."

Mac nodded for a moment to let her know that he would reflect on the idea. He then started helping her put away the welding equipment.

* * * * *

"Schanke, would you hurry it up!" Nick Knight called out from his large 1960's vintage Cadillac to his partner.

"Hey, it'll only be another minute. Jeez, Knight, just because you're on some bizarre health food diet doesn't mean the rest of us can't enjoy a good pizza once in a while." Don Schanke shrugged and then added, "Besides, I'm hungry."

Nick stared at his balding, dark-haired partner in disbelief. "We just stopped for doughnuts an hour ago!"

"I'm a growing boy!" countered Schanke.

Looking at his friend's waistline and smiling, Nick rejoined, "Well, that's certainly true."

The Toronto homicide detective glanced away from the pizza take-out window and shot a glance at his younger partner. He knew Knight was making some kind of fat comment. *Wait'll he gets a wife and kid, Schanke thought. Then he'll find out the only true happiness in this world is a good hunk of pizza. Sure, you're thin, blond, and good-looking now, Knight. But someday you'll meet the right woman, and she'll get you eating Twinkies and Slim Jims for breakfast.* He smiled to himself as his pizza was given to him. *Besides, this is a Meat-and-Garlic-Lover's Special Pizza and you, my dear partner, hate garlic.* He took a piece of the pizza from the box and bit into a slice before going to the car.

As soon as Schanke opened the car door, Nick smelled the overwhelming, awful scent of the garlic. His nose wrinkled involuntarily, and his eyes started to roll back in his head. *Why, he questioned to no one in particular, did I get stuck with a partner that has an Italian food fetish?* Knight sighed deeply and rolled down the window. Life was never fair to a reforming vampire.

* * * * *

Richie leaned back into the corner and glanced around at the crowd in the hotel's ballroom. Every square foot of the room had an antique dealer standing on it, babbling about his Louis the fifteenth bedpan. *Bored, I am so bored. Why are these people so boring? Why am I here?* he thought. He had started the day following Mac and Tessa around. That hadn't lasted long. His obvious impatience with the conference had begun to annoy Tessa. Mac sent him on an errand which he had managed to drag out for two hours. *Now I'm back in the Hotel of the Zombie Antique Dealers. Somebody -- anybody -- take me away.* Running his hands through his curly, sandy hair, he scanned the room again. Like two heat-seeking missiles, his eyes locked onto a good-looking young redhead. He's always especially liked redheads. Straightening up, he began moving through the crowd toward her, pick-up lines streaming through his brain. He decided to go with an old-fashioned but generally successful way of meeting someone. He bumped into her.

"Excuse me," Richie apologized. He flashed her an apologetic smile. "I'm really, really sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," replied the young woman. It's so crowded in here. There's no room to move."

"That's the truth. Are you one of the antique dealers?" Richie asked, hoping the question would lead to a much longer conversation.

"Me? No, well, sort of, I guess. I help my father run a small antique store in Mississauga."

A loud argument between two women about the authenticity of a doorknob momentarily interrupted the exchange. Richie looked towards the women, rolled his eyes slightly, and grimaced. His companion let out a small giggle in response. "So," he asked, "do you enjoy these things?"

"Loathe them actually. I'm Lexi Craven," she stated, holding out her hand. *Kind of cute, she thought. Decent body. And he's the only person here born in the same decade as I was. Now if he'd only turn around so I could get a look at his butt.*

Richie shook it eagerly. "I'm Richie Ryan. I work for an antique dealer who's attending the conference."

The argument about the doorknob ended. One of the women turned around so forcefully that Lexi was nearly knocked over. Richie reached out to steady her. "You want to get out of here?"

"Sure, there's a nice cafe across the street. Want to grab a bite?"

"Anything to get out of the land of the Undead Doorknob Salesman," he quipped. *Don't play it too funny, Ryan, he cautioned himself. She'll think you're a jerk.*

"Let me drop this off with my dad." She held up a canvas bag. "I'll meet you by the lobby desk."

"Sure," Richie nodded. "Sounds perfect." *Hah, yes! Ryan, you still got it, he congratulated himself, pulling his raised fist down in a victory swipe. I'll go find Mac and Tessa and tell them I'm not going to be around.* He stopped himself and considered for a moment. If he went and found them, they might have another errand for him to do, and he didn't want to miss his date with Lexi. *Ah, they probably won't even miss me. This is antique-geek heaven. Besides, I don't have to tell anyone where I'm going.* Shrugging, he made a quick dash towards the men's room to check his hair.

* * * * *

"Mac," Tessa called out, trying to locate her lover of fifteen years. She scanned the crowd for his tall figure. He was no where in sight. Considering that people were tightly packed, she didn't find that surprising. Changing her tactic for locating him, she started searching exclusively for dark brown hair. She finally came across his trademark ponytail bent down in front of an armoire. The Frenchwoman picked her way through the crowd toward him. "Mac."

"Oh, hello, Tessa," Duncan grinned up from the piece of furniture he was studying.

"Anything interesting?" she questioned.

"I may come back later and see if the price is more reasonable." MacLeod shot a smile toward the dealer standing behind the armoire.

"The price is reasonable now. You're just cheap," the man retorted, a smile on his face.

"Tessa, this is Paul Craven. Paul, this is Tessa Noel."

"I've heard a lot about you," Craven replied, holding out his hand towards Tessa. He was a short, white-haired man with laugh lines etched around his eyes.

"Don't believe most of it," said Tessa, shaking the proffered hand.

"I've run into Paul at these affairs before," Duncan explained. "He's still trying to peddle the same old junk."

"Nonsense, it is all new junk," Paul interjected good-naturedly. "And for that insult, I want the dinner you've been promising me since you lost that bet at the '91 convention."

"I didn't lose the bet; you did. But dinner sounds good."

"Mac, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to talk to you for a moment," Tessa broke in.

Excusing themselves to Paulo Craven, the two went over to a less noisy corner of the room. "What is it?" Duncan inquired.

"Do you know where Richie is?"

"Sent him on an errand, oh, about three hours ago," MacLeod answered, glancing at his watch.

"He was supposed to pick up the truck to haul the armor I bought earlier. He's probably around here some place by now."

"I need him to go pick up something for me. Henri has some Eighteenth Century linotypes. He says I can have the lot, but it needs to be picked up before five o'clock. I'm supposed to meet someone about doing an art show in Toronto at four o'clock. I can't go myself."

"It's three-thirty now."

"I'll look for him. He's probably trying to pick up the girl at the hotel shop."

"Probably. I'll look in the pool area."

* * * * *

"And then the old guy said, 'Miss, do you realize that that's a Nineteenth Century chamber pot you have on your head?' Then I said, 'Duh, and here I thought it was a baseball hat for the terminally stupid,'" Lexi finished her story, doing an impression of a helmeted valley girl.

Richie laughed appreciatively and leaned back in the booth. He and Lexi had been passing the afternoon sitting in a cafe, sipping sodas, eating French fries, annoying the waitress, and talking. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such fun just talking. Lexi was easy to talk to. "I didn't realize these antique conventions could be such fun!"

"They're not. You just learn to make your own fun or go totally insane from boredom. There aren't many people my age at them. Antiques seem to attract old people for some reason."

"Can't imagine why," Richie quipped back. "So how do you stand working with your dad at the antique store?"

"Basically my father's pretty amusing for someone that was born before music videos. Though I miss yakking with people. I go to college during the day, then work at the store on nights and weekends. The rest of the time I study." Lexi cocked her head at Richie and stared contemplatively. "Actually, I considered this convention a bit of a vacation."

"Pathetic, you know that. That's the most pathetic thing I've ever heard," Richie teased as he arranged his French fries into a greasy pyramid.

"Yeah? And why are you here, Mr. I-Have-Lots-Better-Places-To-Hang Ryan?"

Mulling the answer over for a moment, Richie shook his head and replied, "My boss said I was going, and he hands out the paychecks. Seemed like a good reason at the time."

"Yeah, so are antiques your future?"

"I don't know," the young man answered, staring at the fries. "I've been thinking about it a lot lately. Haven't come up with any answers yet. Sometimes I think I should find something new."

"Like what?"

"That's just it." Richie knocked the pyramid over. "I have no idea. Mac and Tessa -- they're great and everything, but sometimes I just want to get out on my own for a little while."

"I know what you mean. I'm twenty-one and still living in the same room I had when I was ten," Lexi empathized.

"Maybe I should just take off and see what happens."

"Yeah, tempting idea, but where would it get you? What were you doing before you went into antiques?"

Richie considered the reply carefully. Admitting to a police record was not considered appropriate on the first date as far as he knew. "Hanging out, doing nothing mostly."

"Perhaps you need to think some more. You've got time, and speaking of time--" The woman glanced at her watch. "I've got to meet my dad in fifteen minutes!" Tossing some bills onto the table, she stood up to go back to the hotel.

"Uh, Lexi, what are you doing tonight?"

"I have a party to go to."

"Oh." Richie tried not to sound disappointed. He thought too much eagerness only encouraged the women to walk all over him. Not to mention the fact that he could look like a real idiot if they turned him down. He followed Lexi to the cafe entrance.

"You want to come? Some of my friends from college are throwing a bash for somebody's birthday. They've rented a suite at the Eaton Square Marriott, Room 550."

"Sounds great. What time?"

"Anytime after nine," she replied.

"I'll be there."

* * * * *

Richie found himself whistling as he entered the hotel lobby. Talking to Lexi had been good and not just because she actually seemed to enjoy his presence. When he had told Lexi that Mac and Tessa were great, he had honestly meant it. They had given him a place to live, some security, and -- for the first time he could remember -- trust. Oh, he'd had friends. Still had quite a few of them back in the old

neighborhood. Some of them Richie knew he'd do nearly anything for, but in the world of thieves, trust was perpetually on short supply. What he had a hard time discussing with Mac and Tessa -- Tessa especially -- was his feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Ryan didn't like to admit it to anyone, even himself, but he had no idea what to do next. The work at the antique store was okay as far as it went. Mac at least told him some of the history behind the items they carried, but was not what he wanted to do with his life. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but hauling armoires and ancient suits of armor from one side of town to another was not it. Richie wanted to try something new, yet he didn't want to lose what he had with Mac and Tessa. The closeness, the sense of "family", was important to him. Also the problem of what to try vexed him. College? Trade school? Used car salesman? Again? Acquisition of car parts?

He shook his head. Talking to Mac helped, but he'd never been able to voice his fears about the future. Talking to Tessa... well, that would never happen. Richie knew she accepted his presence in their lives. He knew that she even liked him, kind of. But she was not easily approachable. She was, he searched his brain for the proper term, *aloof*? High class? Majorly a skank babe? he couldn't make out where she was coming from. Mac, despite the fact that he was a four hundred year-old Scotsman who hacked other Immortals' heads off in some crazed power game, was a regular guy. MacLeod could talk about life, motorcycles, why one said stupid things when trying to ask women out, and just about anything else. Richie sighed and made the decision to ask Mac's advice about career choices. *After the convention*, the thought. *After the party*.

During his long mental soliloquy, Richie had managed to walk into the hotel, go to the gift shop, purchase a Coke and Funyons, and find a comfortable chair in the lobby to park himself in. His dilemma faded away as he mentally rehearsed various scenarios with Lexi at the party. He considered indulging his mind in the Drunken-girl-and-the-herd-of-sheep fantasy, but refrained. Tessa managed to get two feet away from him while yelling his name before he even realized she was there.

"Richie!"

"Wha--what?"

"Where have you been?"

"Around," Richie replied, trying to shift gears between pleasant fantasy and the irate woman in front of him.

"It's five-fifteen!" Tessa said angrily.

Glancing at his watch and nodding his head, Ryan replied slowly, "Yes, Tessa, it is in fact five-fifteen."

The young man's flippancy angered Tessa even further. She had had to call Henri and promise him a piece of her work to exhibit sometime in order to get him to let her pick up the linotypes the next day. The transaction had made her very uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable was something she disliked intensely, and now this boy was being cute. Tessa's anger started to increase exponentially. "I needed you to take the truck and pick up something for me."

"I can do it now."

"No, you can't do it now," Tessa exploded, French accent and all. "It had to be done before five o'clock, and you were nowhere to be found. You were supposed to be back hours ago."

"I had something to do," Richie responded angrily. he was irritated at being brought out of his good mood and even more angry at being yelled at about something he knew nothing about.

"What? Checking out women?"

"None of your business."

"it is my business. You work for me, or have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten, but..."

"But what? What were you doing all afternoon?"

"My private life is none of your damn business." Richie's face flushed with rage. He hated being accused, especially when he was innocent. Spinning angrily on his heels, he left the room and his accuser.

Tessa stared after him for a moment, and then she, too, left the lobby.

Duncan MacLeod entered the room a few moments after the other two people in his "family" had left it. There was no one about, and he wondered at how easily it was to lose people in a hotel.

* * * * *

"Hey, you wanna beer?" A kid his own age was holding out a dripping can of Michelob toward him. Richie nodded and thanked him. Pulling back the tab on the beer, he let the cold liquid run down his throat. He finished the can off in a few large gulps, then belched. He had spent the last few hours wandering around Toronto, killing time until the party. Really needing to talk, he'd felt a bit hurt when Lexi did no more than say "hi" to him and introduce him to the guy handing out beers. She'd then left the room with some other woman. He belched again.

"I'm Justin. Wanna 'nother one?" Justin asked, reaching his hand into the plastic trash can that was filled with ice, beer, and wine coolers.

"Yeah, sure. Why not? I'm Richie," he replied. Parties, especially parties where he didn't know anyone, made him nervous. The beer would loosen him up and give him something to do with his hands.

"You've known Lexi long?"

"No, just met her. You've known her long?" Richie questioned, taking another pull on the beer.

"Yeah, we've been in a lot of the same classes. She's a great lab partner. Does most of the work," Justin laughed and handed out some wine coolers to two short women. "She's really great."

Richie cocked his head and took a good look at the other man. He was tall, blond, with a swimmer's build, and, judging by his clothes, well off. "So, you've been dating her, or what?"

"What? Nothing like that. We're just friends. She dated that cheesehead Todd since Freshman Orientation."

"They still together?" Richie was beginning to get a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He finished off the beer.

"Nah, she finally figured out he was a punk. He's seeing Elisa, uh, the blonde over by the potted plant." Justin pointed out a woman in a large crowd of laughing people.

Richie looked where the finger was pointing. "You mean the one with the large tracks of land on her chest?"

"That's one nice set of gazangas, I'll tell you. Anyway, Todd the Cheesehead was seeing Elisa behind Lexi's back. Lexi found out and dumped him. About time, too. Elisa wasn't the first."

"The guy sounds like a real dick."

"Is he ever. Lexi was always way too good for him. Wanna hand me that case back over by the door? We're running out of beer."

"Sure." Richie threaded his way through the crowd toward the door and was nearly knocked over when it was violently flung open.

Lexi, following by a medium-height, stockily built boy, stomped into the room. She was making a very obvious attempt at ignoring the person following her. They were pursued by the woman Lexi had originally left the room with.

"Come on, Lexi, just listen to what I have to say," the boy pleaded, a lock of brown hair falling into his face.

Whirling around to confront the entourage, Lexi yelled, "Piss off, Todd! I don't want to hear your excuses anymore. Karen, I can't believe you'd take his side and set me up like this!"

"If you'd just give Todd another chance to explain," whined Karen.

"Uggghh!" Lexi's frustration vented itself. She looked at the party-goers, many of whom had taken interest in the disruption. Her eyes rested on Richie. "Hi there, Richie. Let's go for a walk. bring a few beers, why don't you?"

"Uh, sure. No problem. Let me get cold ones." Ryan quickly moved through the crowd and gave Justin the warm case and pulled a cold six-pack out of the trash can. Chasing after Lexi, who was exiting the room posthaste, he never noticed Justin glaring hatefully at him.

* * * * *

It was three hours and two six-packs later. They had found a comfortable perch on a little-used balcony near the party. It was a warm night, and Richie was grateful for the breeze on his face. The two had been talking, the conversation starting out at "What and Todd, and men in general, scum -- present company excluded, of course" and had gone to "Why is Tessa picking on me? What did I ever do to her, and what can I do now?"

"So, I dunno, what do you think? Should I go back to the convention and talk to her?"

"Not tonight," Lexi advised Richie seriously over the top of her beer can. "Maybe she'll calm down tomorrow. Why deal with all that yellin' crap."

"You're right. I'll go back over there tomorrow morning." Richie took another slug of beer. "What time is it anyway?"

Lexi peered at her watch. It was decidedly fuzzy, but she finally managed to make out the moving numbers. "Uh, one-thirty A.M., I think. Good thing I told my father I'd be staying in Buffy's room tonight."

"Who's Buggy?"

"Nobody, I made her up as a convenient excuse," the college woman belched proudly.

"You're really smart, you know that," Ryan said admiringly.

"Damn right. I got an A in Good Excuses 101. Where're you gonna stay tonight?"

The truck, I guess. I've still got the keys."

"Wanna stay here? I'm camping out in Justin's room. He wouldn't mind another body."

"Hey, that'd be great," Richie agreed, getting slowly to his feet, tossing the beer can he'd just finished off behind a convenient potted plant.

"Where you going?"

"That was the last beer, and besides, I really gotta piss."

"That's a wonderful idea!" Lexi agreed enthusiastically. I really gotta go, too." She stood up quickly, much too quickly for her alcohol-addled equilibrium. She swayed in place. Richie put out a steadying hand and nearly fell over himself. They both giggled.

"We'll go together," Richie decided.

"Hey, Ryan, you know how you can really tell you're drunk?"

"No, how?"

"When you sit down on the toilet and you hit the seat really hard. That's always a sure sign you've altered your state of consciousness."

"I don't sit down to piss."

"Well," Lexi considered the problem for a moment. "I don't see any reason you couldn't try it for the sake of experimentation."

"All right, as long as it's for science," Richie giggled in response. The two made their way back into the hotel and reentered the party. Getting in line for the bathroom, they glanced around the room. It was a much more relaxed party than it had been a few hours before. The people that were still left were lying around, talking unintelligibly at each other. A perky looking young woman came over to Lexi.

"Hey, Lex, been looking for you," Jennifer said rather breathlessly.

"Yeah, what for?"

"Anthony came to the party with Susan, and now Brenda's all upset, crying and tossing it. She's pretty messed up."

"That shit Anthony." Lexi shook her head in annoyance and disgust. "He just loves to rub Brenda's face in it. Where's she at?"

"Right next door."

The redhead looked at Richie. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Brenda's a friend of mine."

"Hey, I understand. Besides, at the rate this line is going, you'll be back by the time I get through the door."

"Hold my place!" she instructed as she took off with Jennifer through the crowd.

Richie leaned against the wall and reflected that it had been a really good night. Talking and laughing with Lexi had been a really great time. He glanced around the room, his eyes coming to rest on an unopened beer. He leaned forward very carefully and snagged it. The bathroom line was moving incredibly slow, he figured. By the time he reached the toilet, this beer would be ready to come out along with the rest of them. Richie wondered if he should try the experiment that he and Lexi had discussed. He hoped nobody had thrown up on the toilet or in the tub. He hated tub pukers.

The beer didn't have any taste as he sipped on it. Glancing dully around the room, he wished she would come back. His turn at the toilet finally came. Fortunately, nobody had yet puked in the bathroom, as far as his nose could tell. Loosening his fly, he stared at the toilet for a moment and then decided to try the experiment. Moments later, he decided Lexi was right. You did hit the toilet seat a lot harder if you were drunk. Finishing up, he washed his hands and exited the room. Richie was nearly run into by

somebody who was especially anxious to use the bathroom. He decided to tell Lexi to find herself another bathroom. This one looked closed down for the next few hours. Wandering out of the party room, he decided to find her. The hotel hallway smelled fresh compared to the stale smell of the party. There were several doors open, and he popped his head in a few and asked for Lexi. Nobody had seen her, or, for that matter, were capable of seeing much. Finally, he came to a door that was ajar. Knocking, he pushed the door open. He recognized Lexi's shirt. She was sitting on the floor, half-slumped over a pillow. *Probably passed out. Better find Justin's room and move her there*, he thought. "Hey, Lexi, rise and shine. You can't sleep like that."

He'd walked closer to his friend, and now had his hand on her shoulder to shake her. "Come on, let's go." He shook Lexi a little harder, and she slumped over toward her right side, her head falling back. Richie stared at her. There was blood all over the front of her, on her shirt, on her face, everywhere. "Lexi!" he called out as he gently laid her down, searching for any sign of life. It was then he noticed the knife. His hand came down on it as he brought the pillow away from her mid-section. Staring dumbly at it, he was startled by a noise.

"What have you don't to Lexi!" a young man at the door yelled at him. Todd came barreling into the room and stood over the body, taking the bloody sight in. "You've killed her!" Screaming for someone to call the police, Todd pushed Richie away from the body. Other party goers entered the room. They stared at the scene and then at the stranger nobody knew who was sitting dumbly on the floor, staring at the blood on his hands.

* * * * *

"I don't know, Nick," Schanke said thoughtfully, leaning back into the Cadillac's passenger seat. "I love Jenny, crazy about the kid. I'm just not sure if I want to start over with another one."

"Too old for three a.m. feedings?"

"No," his partner retorted. "It's the Lamaze classes, the midnight ice cream runs. Then you've got all the relatives over to see the baby. And all that stuff you've gotta buy!"

"Myra really wants another child, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, she does," he replied, shaking his head in puzzlement. "Must be her biological clock going off or something. Driving me crazy."

"Sorry, Schanke, that happened years ago," Knight joked.

"Feeling funny tonight, are we? Look, the pizza stand's still open. Pull over."

"Again? Sure you're not pregnant?" Pulling the Cadillac over, he stopped in front of the pizza stand. It had been a quiet night so far. They had managed to wrap up a case they'd been working on for several weeks and were currently following up some very tenuous leads on another murder that had occurred down on the rough side of Yonge Street. Nick could have traced down the leads by himself, but Schanke insisted on coming along. He suspected the other man was trying to avoid his wife. The police radio crackled for a moment and then put out a call for him. A moment later, after hearing the message, he stuck his head out of the car. "Hey, Schanke! We've got a call!"

"What is it?" his partner asked, grabbing a handful of napkins and hurrying towards the car, carrying a small pizza.

"A body at the Eaton Square Marriott, Room 552. Hotel security has a suspect in custody."

Opening the door to the Cadillac, Schanke tossed the pizza in the back seat, then buckled his safety belt. "Well, let's go."

Unbeknownst to either detective, the pizza box had opened during its brief flight to the back seat. The gooey topping slid off the crust and onto the Caddy's upholstery. The windows were open, it being a warm night, so neither man noticed the distinctive odor of a garlic and meat lover's pizza.

* * * * *

"Okay, what have we got?" Schanke asked the maroon-suited hotel security guard. The guard had been waiting for them in front of the hotel and was now leading them through the lobby to the elevators.

"A dead girl, about nineteen or twenty. One male suspect, about the same age. A bunch of college kids were having a party up here. We got a few calls about the noise, but they quieted down. At

2:01 am, we got a call from Room 552 that somebody was injured. We called an ambulance and you guys and then headed up for a look."

The three men walked down the dimly lit hotel corridor. Yellow "DO NOT CROSS -- POLICE INVESTIGATION" tape had already been strung across the hallway. A large number of young people were milling about, talking nervously to one another. Some of them were leaning over the tape, trying to get a better look.

"That's gotta stop," Nick said to the security guard as he approached one of the beleaguered uniformed officers on the scene. "Hello, Pete, you got everybody's name down yet?"

"Yeah, it's a real zoo, though. The M.E.'s just arrived."

"All right, everybody," Knight raised his voice loud enough to be heard over the babble of the crowd. "Everybody, please go back to your rooms. You're hindering the investigation."

"We want to know what's going on!" a young, male voice yelled out.

"You will be informed later. We'll be interviewing you later today. So please, all of you go to your rooms," he continued. Some, but not all, of the crowd started to disperse back to their rooms. "Now!" he added more loudly for emphasis. He stood and watched for a moment as the assemblage vanished.

Nicholas of Braebant had been alive for eight hundred years. He had lived through the Black Plague, wars, and various other carnage. He had been a Toronto homicide detective for considerably less time, witnessing the various and sundry ways that humans murdered each other. Here he was, in another room with another dead body. This one had been a lovely young woman, a redhead. Now she was a corpse with her throat cut. There was blood covering her front. The sight of it made him hungry. He shook his head to clear it. Schanke was already bending over the body, examining it for clues, asking the M.E. questions.

"Pete, you said you had a suspect in custody?" Schanke asked the officer.

"Yeah, Neddie's got him cuffed in the next room -- 554. He's pretty wasted. Says he didn't do it."

"That's original. Hey, Knight, I'll stay here and wait for the Coroner's Office to finish up. Why don't you go check out the alleged perp?"

Nick nodded his head in agreement, glad to be away from the blood in the room. Despite all of Natalie's treatments to make him human, he still craved human blood. Sometimes the cravings became overwhelming. The scent of the blood was making it hard to hold on to the humanity he had managed to cultivate the last few years. He knocked on the door to 554 and announced himself. A petite red-haired policewoman opened the door. "Hello, Detective Knight."

"Hi, Neddie," the detective responded, glancing at the young man sitting on the bed. The alleged perp was in his late teens, early twenties, with sandy, curly hair. The head that held the hair was currently half-inserted into a trash can. The scent of stale beer and vomit floated on the air conditioning. "He said anything?"

"That depends if you consider 'blork' a word or not."

Nick gave a small, pained smile at the joke. "No, not really." He walked closer to the figure on the bed. "Okay, what's your name?"

"Ryan, Richie Ryan," came the response. The voice echoed strangely off the inside of the trash can.

"Where are you from?"

Instead of trying to hold any more conversation, Richie fished his wallet out of his back pocket. Nick accepted it and rummaged through its contents. "What are you doing in Toronto?"

"Antique Dealers' Conference."

"You're an antique dealer?"

"Sure, he is, Knight," said Schanke as he entered the room. "He collects old beer bottles."

Deciding to leave the young man to his trash can for a few minutes, the blonde detective walked over to his partner. "What have we got?"

"One dead body. One suspected murder weapon." Schanke handed the plastic-bagged knife over to Nick for examination. "And one perp whom several witnesses claim was standing over the body, holding the knife."

"Uh, huh. I think we have enough to take him in then. The examiner all finished?"

"Yeah, just putting the bag on now. Hey, Neddie, why don't you take him in? Nick and I will finish up here."

"All right," responded Neddie. She walked over to Richie. "You finished tossing it yet?"

"Yeah, for now," Richie responded weakly.

"Good, I hate barf all over the patrol car. It smells for weeks." The uniformed officer put the handcuff on his right wrist and started bringing his left arm around behind him.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"You're under arrest," Neddie explained, "for the murder of Lexi Craven."

"I didn't do it!" Richie protested, standing up violently. The room reeled around him slightly, but he was suddenly cold sober. While he had been half-passed out and sick, he had thought that maybe it was all an alcohol-induced nightmare or that he was misunderstanding what was happening around him. But it wasn't some drunken hallucination. Lexi was dead. All that blood everywhere. And now they were arresting him for it. "I didn't do it!"

"Whatever you say," Pete said. He had come into the room to help Neddie take the perp down to the car. Grabbing Richie by one arm, he started propelling him out into the hallway.

"I didn't do anything!" Richie asserted again as he was led away.

The detective watched his exit with a jaded eye. It was rare that anybody protested their guilt as they were arrested. "So what do you think, Schanke?"

"I think he did it. Got a little drunk, got a little out of hand, some kind of quarrel and bada-boom bada-bing, one dead girl."

"I'm not so sure. The witnesses will need questioning. Party like that though," he commented as they walked into the littered hallway, "it'll be a miracle if anybody remembers anything."

"You never know. They physical evidence should tell us a lot. Hey!" he called out to the hotel security guard who had been waiting patiently. "Make sure no one enters any of the rooms that are marked off."

"Yes, sir. You have to understand the hotel management doesn't want a big deal made out of this," the man replied.

"Sure, bad for business. Just don't touch anything," Schanke yawned. "I need some coffee."

"You need to go home," retorted Nick. "I'll go down to the station to question Ryan."

"Nah, ahhh, ummm," his partner yawned again. "I'm coming with you."

"Suit yourself, but somehow, Schanke, I don't think avoiding Myra is going to solve the problem."

Schanke tilted his head sideways and shook it slightly. "A lot you know about how babies are made, Nick."

* * * * *

Her mind woke up slowly. The phone was ringing, but it was far away. Not wanting to become all the way awake, Tessa rolled over and pushed her head deeper into the pillow. *Let Duncan answer it*, she thought. *I'm too tired and the pillow is much too soft to leave.* She felt the bed shift as her lover's weight left it. Then the ringing stopped. The sound of Duncan's voice started. The tone was wrong, though. Duncan's voice had become edged, upset. Tessa sat up and waited for his return.

MacLeod came back into the room and turned on the small light in the corner. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he started pulling on pants over blue boxers.

"Duncan, what's wrong?" Tessa asked anxiously.

"That was Metro Police," he responded slowly, his expression dark.

"Is it Richie?" Tessa's stomach lurched, their earlier quarrel forgotten. "Is he hurt?"

"No," MacLeod answered, pulling on a shirt and starting to look for shoes.

"What then?"

"He's been arrested on suspicion of murder."

Not asking any more questions, Tessa stood up and started putting on clothes. "I'm coming with you."

Not saying a word, Duncan came over to her side. Drawing her gently toward him, he held her for a moment. "Thank you. I'll bring the car around to the front of the hotel."

They drove to the police station in silence. The tension was palpable. After a few wrong turns in an unfamiliar city, they arrived. The building looking like police stations everywhere -- well-lit and busy, even at three o'clock in the morning. After parking the car, they entered.

"Excuse me," Duncan asked the first officer they spotted. "My friend has been arrested. Where can I find the shift sergeant?"

The woman pointed them down a small hall. The sergeant was sitting in a large, fenced-off work area. Several people were leaning against the walls around the area. "Excuse me, my friend has been arrested. I'll like to..."

"Name?" the man questioned in a tired voice.

"Ryan, Richie Ryan. He was just brought in a little while ago."

The man flipped through a few sheets of computer paper. "Yeah, we've got him."

"I'd like to speak to him, if possible."

"You can't see him for a few minutes. Are you his attorney?"

"No, I need to call mine."

"There's a pay phone down the hall," the officer pointed. He said something to the uniformed officer who led Duncan and Tessa to a small, white room. There was only a table with a few chairs around it. Richie was resting his head on the table when they entered. He looked up at the sound of the door.

"Am I glad to see you, guys!" he called out to them gratefully. Standing up, he found himself embraced by both Mac and Tessa. Relief flooded through him -- maybe he'd get through this all right after all.

"Richie, what happened?" MacLeod asked, breaking off the display of affection.

"Yes, what happened?" Tessa prompted.

"I went to a party with this girl I met at the antique show. Her name was Lexi craven," he explained. Richie watched Duncan shake his head sadly. "What, did you know her?"

"No, but I know her father. Go on."

"Some of her friends from college were giving this big bash, and I met her there. We were just drinking and having a good time in general."

"Yes, we can smell that," Tessa interjected. She wrinkled her nose slightly. Unless Richie had been lying on the floor of a brewery, he had recently been very drunk.

"Yeah, well I did have a few beers. So did Lexi," Richie continued his story. From his point of view, everything was fuzzy until the handcuffs had been put on him. But he knew one thing -- he had never killed Lexi. "I liked her, liked her a lot. I didn't kill her, honest." He finished his narrative and looked at the two faces seated in front of him. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course, we do," Tessa affirmed, more fiercely than Ryan had expected. He was, she knew, an adolescent pain in the rear, occasionally spectacularly irresponsible, and given to being a smart mouth. But they had been through a lot together. Richie Ryan had been a trusted friend to both Duncan and she. He could no more kill an innocent girl than he could fly.

Duncan laid a hand on Richie's shoulder. "We know you didn't kill her. Think -- can you think of anybody that might have? Did you see or hear anything before you went into the room?"

"No, it's all so blurry. I was kinda drunk."

There was a knock at the door, and a policeman stuck in his head, informing them that they'd had to leave now. Duncan nodded at the order. Patting Richie's shoulder, he stood up. "You keep trying to remember. I'm going to get you a lawyer."

"Thanks, Mac, Tessa. Thanks a lot," were the only words Richie could force out as he watched his two friends leave. A few minutes later, one of the detectives he had seen at the hotel showed up and began questioning him.

* * * * *

It had been easier than he could have ever imagined. There had been no struggle, no cries of pain or fear, nothing to distract him from his duty. It had been a duty, he had told himself. She had needed protection, to be someplace safe beyond hurt or pain of any kind. Yes, a duty that he had to perform because no one else would have done it. It had been as simple as turning off a light switch. Things hadn't

gone exactly as planned after that. The one who should have been blamed, yes, the one that had already caused pain and should have been punished. That one had managed to escape his just chastisement. Someone else had taken the burden. But that was of no consequence. Everything was just fine now.

* * * * *

"You ask me, Mel Gibson has the nicest ass of any man around," Grace said through a cheese and tomato sandwich.

Dr. Natalie Lambert flicked her long, auburn hair out of her barbecued ribs and shook her head. Grabbing a napkin to remove the offending sauce from her hair, she retorted, "No, I still think Costner's is better."

"Are you crazy! His is flat and nothing compared to Mel's. Mel's is like two little marshmallows doing a dance."

Biting into a rib, Natalie considered the proposed question of the night -- "Who has the best posterior around?" -- a little longer. It had been a relatively slow night at the Toronto Morgue. So far, the only customers had been a car accident and a suspected murder victim. She and Grace had handled the car accident and decided to have their late night lunch break before tackling the murder victim. "Denzel Washington has a good tooshie."

"That's very true -- very, very true. A most fine gluteus maximus."

"Hey, Grace, have you ever noticed that no really nice buns come in here?"

Grace considered that Natalie Lambert was beautiful, a very niche lady, a very competent medical examiner, and could eat an entire pint of *Ben and Jerry's* chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream in under fifteen minutes. She was also, at times, as thick as a brick. "NO nice buns come in here?"

"That's right. All we ever get id dead guys, cops that have rears over a meter wide from all those doughnut runs, and orderlies who are in need of a bath and a few weeks of nautilus training. It's just not fair."

"You're blind, that's it, isn't it?"

"What?" Natalie asked, fishing another rib out of the greasy sauce.

"You're telling me you've never noticed Detective Knight's most excellent posterior running in and out of this morgue?" Grace questioned.

"No," Natalie replied, trying to put on an air of offended innocence. "Of course not. Nick's a friend and colleague."

"Yes," Grace leaned closer to her boss, "and he is the possessor of one cute ass. You look me in the eye and tell me you've never noticed."

"No! Grace!" the medical examiner protested. She tried to sound outraged, but was only managing to sound guilty. "Of course, I've never looked."

"Looked at what, Nat?"

Natalie gagged on the rib she was chewing. She starting fishing around for her can of soda.

"Well, hello, Detective Knight," Grace called out in greeting. "We were just talking about you."

"You were?" Nick's eyes brightened. "Is that why my ears were burning?"

"Probably." Grace stood up and started picking up the remains of her meal. Natalie was still sipping soda and trying not to look at Nick. "I'm sure Dr. Lambert will tell you all about it." Leaving the room, the woman shot Natalie a big, shit-eating grin.

"Well?" Nick asked Natalie who was licking barbecue sauce from her fingers.

"Nothing. It was nothing."

"Come on, now," Nick teased, sensing that she was hiding something. "You can tell me."

"No, I can't, Nick. I just can't," she replied, her eyes widening slightly as she saw Grace hold up a small sign that said "Nice View" on it from the door behind where Nick was standing.

Sensing that something was going on behind him, the detective quickly turned around. But grace had already left. Shaking his head slightly in puzzlement, he quipped, "You're no fun, Nat."

"That's because I have very nasty co-workers. What's prompted this visit?"

"I was wondering if you've done a work-up on the body that was sent over a few hours ago. A young woman, murder victim from the Eaton Square Marriott."

"No." Natalie picked up the remains of her meal and shoved it into a garbage can. "What just about to start it, though. What to stick around?"

"Might as well. We've managed to get nothing out of the alleged perp except cries of innocence and a lot of undigested beer and pretzels." Nick turned around, walked a few steps, then perched himself on top of a nearby counter. When he turned around, he noticed a strange look on Nat's face. "You all right?"

"Yeah, sure." Natalie tried to clear the picture of Nick's backside out of her mind. She slipped on some latex gloves and gathered the tools she'd need to perform the autopsy. Reading through the report the M.E. on the scene had sent, she started recording a report. Based on the temperature and condition of rigor of the body, she placed the time of death between 1:30 and 2:00 A.M. Cause of death was hemorrhagic shock due to a large incision in the jugular vein and carotid artery. In layman's terms, her throat had been cut. The alcohol level in the blood was high, 0.21, indicating that the young woman had been drinking that night. There were no indications of a struggle. No bruising around the neck. There were no drugs other than alcohol in her system. Except for the incision that ended her life, Lexi Craven appeared to have been a very healthy, young woman.

"So that's it," the medical examiner pronounced finally. "She died due to the slit throat, knife drawing from left to right. Probably a right-handed perp."

"That's all? Nothing under the fingernails?"

"Nope."

"No bruising?"

Nat replied to Nick's question with a shake of her head.

"Any chance that she was suffocated?"

"No, she may have been unconscious before her throat was cut, though. With that high of an alcohol level, she may have already passed out."

"Hmm, well, not much to go on then."

"What about the guy you arrested?"

"I'm not sure yet. We've got witnesses that need to be questioned, and the murder weapon is in custody. I'm waiting for the report on it."

"Have to wait until tomorrow. It's getting near your bedtime," Nat chided Nick. "By the way, have you been taking that tea I sent over to you?"

"Of course," Nick nodded seriously.

"Uh huh, twice a day like it says on the bottle?"

"Yes, I'm following the directions explicitly."

Dr. Lambert rocked back slightly on her heels, crossed her arms, and stared skeptically at the man in front of her. "Nick, the bottle says to take once a day."

"Oh yeah, that's right," he mumbled, then smiling at her, said, "It tastes so good that I'm taking twice as much."

"Why don't I believe you? Look, Nick, if you want to stop being a vampire, you've got to take the solutions I prepare. You do still want to be human, right?"

"Right. Only why does everything you mix up taste so terrible?"

"Is that a crack about my cooking, Detective?"

"Of course not. After all, I've never tasted your cooking."

"Go away, Nick." Natalie closed her eyes in mock disgust. "Go away. I have to file this report."

"Still coming over tomorrow?"

"Yes, I have a really great video for us to watch."

"What is it?" inquired Knight.

"*Speed Race and the Car Hater*."

Not even wanting to ask what the video was about, Nick made his exit.

* * * * *

"All right, let me get this straight. You see her slumped over on the floor and go over to where she is. You touch her, and she slumps over dead and the knife--" Detective Don Schanke paused for emphasis. "The knife just happens to brush against your hand and get your fingerprints on it?"

Richie lolled his head over so it faced the homicide detective. "Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Now why don't I believe it?"

"Maybe you're just not a very trusting kind of guy?" Richie questioned.

Schanke narrowed his eyes at the remark. He'd been questioning the kid for over two hours. Ryan had not wavered at all in his story, not once. The detective didn't find that very surprising. They'd received a copy of Ryan's police record that morning. There was an assortment of breaking and entering charges, selling of stolen goods, trespassing and one charge that Schanke found most interesting. The kid had been picked up once for assault with intent to cause bodily harm. The charge had been dropped due to lack of evidence. Just because a charge was dropped didn't mean the perp was innocent, and it might suggest a tendency to violent behavior. Ryan obviously had a history of run-ins with the police and was an old hand at interrogation. He had had to wait to question the kid until this morning. There had been some legal hassle with him being an American citizen, and the department really wanted him to have a lawyer present before questioning again. Well, the lawyer wasn't there yet, but there would be no harm to soften the kid up before legal counsel did. It was going to be a long day. Schanke yawned. He had not come home until four in the morning and had managed to get in at eight. The only time he'd seen Myra was when they were both grabbing for the Mr. Coffee machine in the kitchen. He yawned again.

"Look, Detective, if you're getting tired, we can take a break," Richie suggested solicitously.

"I've only just begun," The older man held up a stack of papers. "Do you know what this is?"

Richie shook his head in reply.

"This is your rap sheet. Rather a thick one for someone who's -- what did you say you were? A delivery boy for an antique dealer?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, I think you've gone beyond a little breaking and entering this time. I think you killed Lexi Craven."

"I didn't kill her. I found her dead," Richie replied for what seemed to him like the thousandth time.

"I think you did. The evidence says you held the knife." Schanke's voice became softer, taunting. "I think you sneaked up behind that girl and slit her throat and then you watched her bleed to death."

"I didn't do it," Richie forced out, the image of Lexi's dead, blood-soaked body replaying itself in his mind.

"There are witnesses to say that you did."

"I didn't do it. Why would I?" came Richie's brittle reply.

"Maybe you were trying to get her to help you steal from her father's shop. Maybe she wouldn't put out? Maybe you did it just for the hell of it?"

Richie looked away from the officer, trying to get a handle on his emotions. He knew from past experience that losing his cool would not help his case any, but this guy was really getting to him. He knew he was innocent, but there was no way of telling how anything he said would be twisted. He wished Mac was there. "I'm telling you again. I didn't kill Lexi, and there is no way anyone saw me kill her because I DIDN'T DO IT!!!"

Sensing a small victory, Schanke smiled. "Of course, you didn't. Now why don't we go through this again? When did you meet Lexi Craven?"

Richie drew in a deep breath to start repeating his story when there was a knock on the door. A uniformed officer stuck his head in. "Detective Schanke, Ryan's lawyer is here."

"Good, send him in."

"He wants to meet with his client alone. Pretty ticked off that his client has been questioned without counsel present."

"Hey, it's ten o'clock in the morning. What does he think we're going to do, wait all day for him to show?" Schanke looked over at the murder suspect slumped in the chair. "I'll be back, Richie, very soon. Then we'll go over your story again."

"I can't wait," Richie mumbled, glad for the reprieve."

A thin, blue-suited black man entered the room followed by Mac and Tessa. It had taken them several hours to find a Canadian lawyer to take the case. Detective Schanke and the uniformed officer exited the room.

"Hey, Schanke, do you think that guy really did it?"

"Yeah," Don responded through a yawn. "I mean, his prints are on the murder weapon. There are people that placed him with the body. Looks pretty clear cut to me. I'm going to go and grab something to eat. The lawyer will probably be in there for a while.

* * * * *

The sun slowly set, its last dying orange rays bouncing off Lake Ontario and the glittering buildings of Toronto's downtown. Nick shrugged on a black blazer, checking his pocket for the Caddy's keys. He hit the playback on the answering machine before leaving.

"Hey, Nick, it's me, Nat. Wanted to know if you'd like to go see a play next Saturday. Give me a call when you get up." The machine beeped and went on to the next message.

"...and by calling back in the next ten minutes, you may win a fabulous prize! Call 555-6676 in the next ten minutes and..." The computerized voice on the tape squealed as Knight hit fast-forward. He hated it when machines tried to sell his machines things it didn't need.

"Hey, Knight, we've got to interview more witnesses in the Craven murder tonight. Still no confession out of the Ryan kid. I'm going to be pulling a bit of O.T. so pick me up at the station. *Hasta la bye-bye.*"

Nick hit rewind and headed down to his garage. His movements were automatic, his thoughts on what needed to get done tonight at work. Thoughts about the Craven case, the paperwork that he had put off last night, and the fact that Schanke still wouldn't go home floated through his mind as he opened the door to the Cadillac. The smell assaulted him as soon as the door was open. The overwhelming, stomach-flipping smell of garlic. He flinched and slammed the door shut. Waiting a moment for the weakness to pass, he began walking around the car, peering into the windows. He spotted the offending object on the upholstery and floor in back of the passenger side. One small meat and garlic lover's pizza, or at least parts of it.

"I'm going to kill him," Nick said aloud. "This time, I'm really going to kill him." With arms stretched out as far as they could, he opened all the car doors and then ran to find some Lysol spray.

* * * * *

"He'll be fine, Tessa," Duncan assured the worried woman beside him. It had been a long day, filled with lawyers, police, stress, and worry. The lawyer they had hired to defend Richie had doubts that Richie would get bail when he appeared before the judge later then next day. Murder was taken seriously in Canada, he informed them, and quite frankly, the evidence was not supporting the young man's story. They had both assured the defender that Richie couldn't be guilty.

"I wish I was as confident as you are, Duncan," she replied apprehensively. He patted her arm, and they continued down the hallway. "Isn't that the man who was questioning Richie earlier?" Tessa inclined her head towards a balding, dark-haired man who was walking towards them with a younger, much better-dressed man.

"Yes, I think it is," MacLeod responded. Letting go of Tessa's arm, he strode down the hall towards the two men. "Excuse me," he interrupted their conversation. "I'm a friend of Richie Ryan's. Could I talk to you about his case?" The two detectives made no response to his overture. "My name is Duncan MacLeod. You are working on his case, aren't you?" he asked, looking at the older man.

"Yeah, I'm Detective Schanke and this is Detective Knight," the man introduced himself and his partner.

Duncan turned his head towards Detective Knight to acknowledge the man and stared. The man was familiar-looking, very familiar. He tried to place his face among the people that he had met in the last few years, but no match was found. The face was familiar, but the clothing and place was wrong.

Nick looked back at the man who was staring at him. He wondered if he knew the man, but no tall Scotsman came to mind. *And after eight hundred years, people are beginning to all look very similar,* he thought to himself. The man's intense gaze was starting to make him nervous so he decided to break the silence. "Yes, we're working on the case," he replied. "And we're not allowed to discuss it."

"He didn't kill that girl," said MacLeod forcefully. "I know him very well, and he is no killer."

"Yeah, whatever," Schanke dismissed the man with a wave of his hand. "Everybody we bring in here is a choir boy if you ask their friends."

"Richie would never do anything like that." Tessa had caught up to the gathering.

Both Schanke and Nick looked at the attractive Frenchwoman for a moment. Then, tired of being interrupted in his search for another cup of coffee, Schanke decided to end the conversation. "Look, we're not allowed to discuss the case with anybody. And if you really want to help your friend, you'll let us get on with our investigation. Okay?"

Tessa opened her mouth to say something further, but Schanke had already continued his path down the hallway. Both she and Duncan turned to Nick.

"I'm sorry, but my partner's right. We cannot discuss a murder investigation," Knight apologized. The Scotsman was beginning to stare at him again, so he took off after Schanke.

Tessa sighed in annoyance but then looked at Duncan who was still staring after the blond detective. "What is it, Duncan? Do you know him?"

"I'm not sure. He seems very familiar somehow." MacLeod narrowed his eyes and tried to force his memory to give up the place where he had seen the detective before. Nothing was forthcoming.

"So what are we going to do now? The police aren't any use."

"I think it's time we started our own investigation." Taking his lover's arm, he led her out of the police station.

* * * * *

Tessa looked over at Duncan as they exited the police station. He was rubbing the back of his neck tiredly. It had been a long day for both of them, but especially him. Duncan cared for Richie very much and was protective of him. The strain of not being able to do anything for the young man other than getting him a lawyer and then still having him in jail was difficult. She moved closer to him and ran her hand down the back of his head to his neck. Duncan moved his own hand and let her gently rub the back of his neck for a moment. "Why don't you let me drive?" she suggested.

"All right," he agreed as they got into the rental car. He sat pensively in the passenger's seat, staring out the window.

"Where it?"

"Why don't we go back to the hotel and talk to Paul Craven. Maybe he can give us some clue as to who would want to murder his daughter."

"Don't you think the police have already done that?" she asked as she pulled the car out onto Toronto's streets.

"No, I doubt it. They seem to think they've already got the murderer."

"Maybe we should question some of the students that were at the party?"

"Yeah, we'll do that tomorrow. I hope they'll still be around."

"The police have undoubtedly been questioning them. Maybe they were told to stay in town for a few days?"

"Maybe," Duncan replied and then went back to staring out the window. *Where have I seen that detective before?* He knew he should be concentrating on helping Richie, but he couldn't shake Knight's face out of his mind. It was important, somehow, but he didn't know why. He stared out the window into the darkness as Tessa threaded her way back through the Toronto streets to the hotel.

Tessa parked the car and had to announce that they had arrived before Duncan started moving again. They walked into the hotel and took the elevator to the floor that Paul Craven was staying on. There was no response at first to Duncan's knock on the door. He knocked again, slightly louder. This time there was a response, and a voice called out from behind the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Duncan MacLeod. I'd like to talk to Paul Craven."

"My father is not up to seeing anybody right now. You can leave a message at the front desk."

"Can you tell him it's very important? It concerns his daughter's death," Duncan replied urgently.

There was a brief silence behind the door, and the sound of two voices -- one older and male and the other a young female -- talking for a moment. Then the door was unchained and opened. Paul Craven was sitting on the bed closest to the door. His face was haggard and pale as he stared at the floor. Drawing a deep breath, he spoke first, "Duncan, Tessa, I just want you to know I don't blame either of you."

"Blame us for what?" MacLeod responded, puzzled.

"For Lexi's death. I know that boy worked for you. But it's so hard to judge people anymore. I'm sure you didn't know what kind of person he was. I just wanted you to know I don't blame you." Paul's voice was quiet and distant.

Before her companion could make a reply, Tessa jumped in, "We're both terribly sorry about Lexi, Paul. You and your family must be in terrible pain."

"Yeah, and it's your scummy friend that killed my sister," the young girl that had answered the door shot back. She looked to be about eleven or twelve years old and was a red-head like her sister.

"Rosalind, please." Craven reached out and patted his daughter's back comfortingly. "They had no control over him." Rosalind became silent again but continued staring at Duncan and Tessa menacingly. "My wife was in Vancouver on business. She'll be flying in tomorrow morning. I don't know what I'm going to say to her. It was my idea that Lexi come with me on this trip."

"It's not your fault," Tessa said sympathetically.

"And it's not Richie's, either," Duncan interjected, finally finding an opening in the conversation.

"What do you mean?" questioned Craven, lifting his head up for the first time since the two had entered the room.

"I mean that Richie didn't kill Lexi."

"Yes, he did." Rosalind moved away from her father, closer to Duncan. "The police told us that they were sure they had the guy that killed Lex."

"No, he didn't," Duncan argued.

"I'm sorry, Duncan, but the police did say he did," Craven affirmed.

"Look, Paul." Duncan turned his attention away from the child in front of him and towards his friend, making eye contact. "Paul, I'm terribly sorry about Lexi. I know how much you loved her. But I know Richie Ryan, and he would never kill anyone."

Craven looked at the Scotsman for a moment and then looked away. MacLeod truly believed what he was saying; concern and sincerity were stamped on his face. "The evidence says otherwise, according to the detectives."

"I know it does. That's why I need to ask you some questions. There has to be something else going on. Some clue that they've overlooked."

"Please, Paul," Tessa asked, "help us. If Richie is innocent, his life will be wasted in jail. Is there anything that you can think of that can help us?"

The antique dealer rose from the bed and walked over to the small table in the room. He poured himself a glass of ice water slowly and took a sip. *They're so sure he's innocent, he thought to himself. And the police are so sure he's guilty. What if they're right, though? Should another young life be wasted senselessly? Lexi liked the boy; she told me so before she went to the party. She always has a sense about people... Had a sense. Ah, Lexi, I can't believe you're gone.* "All right, I'll answer your questions, but I can't think of anything off-hand that could help."

"Was anybody threatening her? An old boyfriend, perhaps?" Duncan inquired.

"No, she and Todd broke up a while back. I think he's been wanting to get back together with her. But she said he was really a jerk and not worth the effort. He never made a threat toward her that I know of."

"Was she getting any odd phone calls or anything?"

"No," Paul replied, shaking his head.

"Yes," Rosalind spoke up. The three adults turned their attention to her. "She'd been getting calls where the person would hang up as soon as she answered the phone."

"When did this happen?" Craven asked his daughter.

"Oh, it's been going on for a few months. Lex said not to worry about it."

"Did the person ever say anything to her?" questioned Tessa.

"Well..." Rosalind concentrated before replying further. "A few times I'd answer the phone, and it'd be a guy asking for her, but when she said hello, he'd hang up."

"It was a man, then?"

"Yeah."

"Was it Todd?" inquired MacLeod.

"No, I don't think so. They'd only say one or two words, though."

"Rosalind, think carefully. Was there anything you noticed about the voice at all?"

The girl shook her head. "No, but wherever they were calling from was always noisy. There was music and yelling."

"Did you tell the police this?" Duncan asked the girl.

"No, they didn't ask me anything. The guy with garlic breath only talked to Dad." Rosalind shook her head, disgusted at the idiocy of adults.

"Thank you very much," Duncan told Rosalind gravely. He and Tessa made their good-byes and left the room.

"Well?" Tessa asked as they boarded the elevator to their floor.

"Well, at least we know that there was at least one person who may have been threatening Lexi."

"Any ideas on how we're going to find him?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure I'll have something figured out by morning." He gave her a small smile as they entered the room.

* * * * *

Tessa made a small noise, and Duncan turned towards her from where he had been staring out the window. She was rolling over and tangling herself up in the covers. He smiled as he went over the straightened them out again. Going back to the window, he stared out at the bright lights, arms folded. He knew he should be trying to get some sleep, that tomorrow would be a long day and he would need to have his wits sharp, but his thoughts would not be quiet long enough for sleep to come. Despite his assurances to Tessa, he was not confident about finding out who had been threatening Lexi. They would try questioning her friends tomorrow. Hopefully, one of them would have some ideas. The other thought that kept fluttering around in his head was where he had seen Detective Knight before. The man's face kept knocking at his consciousness, trying to elicit a response. Duncan rolled his head around, trying to loosen the muscles in his neck. Quietly opening the window, he leaned forward into the night air. Taking a deep, calming breath, he looked down and remembered.

* * * * *

"You're a fool, Duncan, if you got to her."

"Me? A fool? Never," MacLeod grinned broadly at his companion. The two men were enjoying wine and dinner at a fairly respectable pub that Paul Fowler liked to frequent. They'd been laughing, drinking, and discussing women the entire evening.

"The woman is going to be married, Duncan. I doubt if her husband-to-be would like used good."

"You make her sound like a loaf of bread, Paul," Duncan laughed as he replied to his friend's statement. He picked up his glass of wine and started to finish it off.

"No, not an entire loaf of bread -- just a tart," Paul retorted while Duncan was in mid-gulp. The Scotsman laughed instead of swallowing and sprayed the wine all over the front of his friend's shirt.

"Thank you so much, you Scots poofster!" Paul grabbed the jacket the MacLeod had laid across the back of the chair and started wiping at the stains.

"That's my jacket!"

"That's your spit!" Paul countered, wiping more furiously, managing only to ingrain the red wine stain deeper into his shirt. He started laughing. MacLeod couldn't help but join in, and they sat for several minutes in shared mirth.

"Why are we laughing?" the highlander finally inquired.

"I don't know. I just enjoy that girlish giggle you've got, old chum."

"Girlish giggle?"

"Yeah, that's right. For such a big fellow, you start giggling like a school girl once you've got a few glasses of wine in you."

"I do not!"

"Do, too!"

"No, you listen here, Paul Fowler. I do not giggle like a girl!"

"Yes, you do. All the fellows think so," Paul assured him with drunken seriousness, nodding his head gravely.

MacLeod leaned back in his chair slightly and replied with great affront, "I don't laugh like a girl, but you ride a horse like one!"

"How would you know, looking at my arse again?" This reply sent the two men into gales of laughter again which lasted for several minutes before one of the servers came over and asked if they wanted refills.

"Oh, yes, definitely," Paul replied, trying to stifle another chuckle. He looked around the room they were in. It was filled with serious-looking men smoking and drinking. A few, he noticed, were staring at Duncan and him. Bunch of old moldy farts, he thought. Think they'd never had a good time in their lives. One man in particular was looking disdainfully at them. Can't see why he's looking down his nose, not with a haircut like that.

"So you think going to see Elizabeth is a bad idea?" Duncan asked, drawing his friend out of his reverie.

"Yes, I do."

"I mean nothing improper by her. I simply want to make sure that she's happy with the marriage she's making."

Paul looked over at his tall friend and shook his head slowly. "Duncan MacLeod, I've known you for years. You are a very kind and generous gentleman and a good friend. I know that you mean nothing improper by Elizabeth, but there are those who would not see it that way. All a young lady has is her reputation. Edmund Parker is considered quite a good catch for her."

"But what if she doesn't love him?"

"What does it matter? Both families have agreed to the marriage." Paul accepted the glass proffered by the server and took a small sip. "Duncan, I know you had feelings for Elizabeth. I also care for my cousin. But let us both be honest -- you don't intend to marry her, and the girl needs a husband."

"Why?"

"I don't know -- to feed the dogs?" said Fowler, shrugging.

"Be serious, Paul," countered Duncan.

"Because it is what all young women do."

"Even if they don't want to?"

"Yes," Paul sighed and took a large sip of his drink. MacLeod did the same.

"You're not happy about your upcoming marriage to Anne, are you?" Duncan asked, suddenly realizing why his friend's mood had turned so serious suddenly.

"What does it matter? Everyone else is." The two men continued drinking in relative silence for a while. Duncan couldn't get his friend to discuss what was troubling him. The room started emptying out.

"Will sir be staying the night?" one of the servers asked right next to Duncan's elbow.

"Uh..." The Scotsman shook his head to clear it. He looked across the table; Paul was slumped in his chair, snoring softly. "I won't be, but he will." Getting up from his chair, he moved over to his friend and gently shook him. No response was forthcoming, so he gently hauled the other man to his feet and started dragging him up the stairs. The server led him to an empty room, and he deposited the still snoring man on the bed. Duncan closed the door and started to leave the pub. He was nearly out the door when he remembered that Paul had been using his jacket as a napkin, and the coat contained his wallet. Sighing wearily, he made his way back to the room where he had left his friend. The stairs seemed steeper this time. Pushing open the door, he stepped inside the room, staring for just a small moment at the scene he found. There was a man -- tall, blond -- bending over Paul who was still stretched over the bed. Thinking that he had interrupted a robbery, Duncan yelled, "Get away from him!"

The other man backed slowly away from the figure on the bed and towards the window in the room. There was something odd about the way Paul was lying on the bed. He was too still even for someone passed out from drink. Keeping his eyes on the robber, Duncan edged over to his friend and felt his neck for a pulse. There was none, and MacLeod's hand came away from the neck damp with blood. "You've killed him!"

"No, I'm sorry," the thief replied, backing even further away from him.

Duncan rushed the man and was shocked to find himself crashing into the far wall of the room. The thief had only stepped out of his way. The man opened the window and for a split second looked at him. There was something unnatural about the thief's eyes. Then the man jumped out of the window. Without pausing, Duncan did the same and found himself staring down a three-story drop. The landing had hurt. The cobbles were uneven, and he was unable to roll to dissipate the force of the fall. But it had only taken an instant to get back on his feet. He scanned the area for the blond thief. A dark shadow caught his eye for a moment, but then disappeared, then there was no one in sight.

* * * * *

"Damn!" MacLeod muttered to himself. The detective that had arrested Richie looked exactly like the thief that had murdered Paul. Not a thief, though. Paul's wallet and watch hadn't been disturbed at all. As for the cause of death, the doctor called in at the time had ascribed it to shock and too much rich drink. Duncan hadn't believed that. He'd examined the body himself. Fowler had died from loss of blood only that had been no blood other than a small amount on the neck. The murder had never been solved. *It can't be the same man. That was over a hundred years ago, and Detective Knight is no Immortal. I would have sensed it immediately if he was. Just a bizarre resemblance, that's all.* The nagging question of where he had seen Detective before had been solved. The more important question of how to help Richie remained. *I'm not going to solve this tonight,* Duncan told himself. *Best to try and get some sleep. Maybe something will come to me in the morning.*

Climbing softly in beside Tessa, he tried to push all thoughts from his mind in order to sleep.

* * * * *

"It's not that bad, Knight," Schanke shrugged his shoulders.

"Not that bad? Not that bad?!" yelled Nick. "My entire car smells like garlic, and you're saying it's not that bad?"

"Kind of like the smell myself. Too bad you sprayed Lysol on it," his partner replied, then, seeing Nick's infuriated look, decided to placate him. "I'll get the upholstery cleaned if that's what you want."

"Yes, that's what I want, as well as the carpeting!"

"Yeah, yeah, and the carpeting. I'll get it done tomorrow, no problem."

Nick pointed a finger at his fellow detective and shook it forcefully. "And no more eating pizza in my car."

"That's inhuman, partner. You can't expect me to go hungry!" whined Schanke.

"Yes. I. Can." Nick replied, enunciating every word. Then he took a new can of Lysol and started spraying the interior of his Cadillac again.

Shaking his head in martyrdom, Schanke watched the procedure. Nick was one weird guy. Who wouldn't like their car to smell like garlic? "Ryan is still sticking to his story."

"Still just an innocent bystander?"

"Yeah, he'll cave in sooner or later though."

The two detectives got into the car, leaving the windows wide open despite Schanke's protests that he would get a chill. They drove toward the Eaton Square Marriott. Nick pulled the Cadillac into a parking space in front of the hotel and hopped out. He glanced over to his partner. Schanke was snoring softly, propped up against the car door. Walking quietly around the car, Knight yanked open the door. Schanke yelped and was barely able to keep from falling out onto the pavement.

"Cute, Knight, really cut," the tired man muttered. "I'm just trying to get some sleep."

"Why don't you go home then?"

"Because Myra is there, and besides," he yawned broadly, "I'm not really tired."

"Right, Schanke. Why don't you just tell Myra that you have some fears about having another child?"

"Don't be an idiot, Knight. Never admit fear to your wife. They live for that kind of thing."

Shaking his head in disgust, Nick led the way into the hotel. They made a small stop at a soda dispenser so Schanke could get some caffeine and then went to question some more of the people that had been at the party the night of Lexi Craven's murder.

Two hours later, they were still interviewing people. The general story that they heard was that: 1) "I didn't see anything," 2) "I was kind of wasted and didn't realize what was going on," 3) "No, I don't know Richie Ryan at all," 4) "No, I don't know why anyone would want to kill Lexi; she was a really sweet girl."

"Nada so far, partner," Schanke said to Nick as he got up to get another cup of coffee. His hands were starting to shake with excess caffeine.

"Not a very observant bunch, are they? Who's next on the list?"

"Uh, Todd Hobarth."

"Isn't he the one that came in on the murder?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you question him earlier today?" inquired Nick.

"He said he didn't feel well enough to talk about it. With all that booze flowing, I'm not surprised." The detective walked out the door for a moment, then returned with the young man, around twenty. They both sat down and Nick asked if Todd objected to the conversation being taped. He indicated that he didn't.

"Please state your name."

"Todd Hobarth."

"Where were you last night?"

"I was here at the hotel, the Marriott, at a party."

"Were you at the hotel the entire evening?"

"Yeah, from about seven o'clock. Me and some buddies started partying early."

"Did you know Lexi Craven?"

"Know her? I dated her since the first week of freshman year."

"And how long has that been then?"

"Oh, about two years."

"You were still dating?"

Todd shook his head in response. "No, we broke up a while ago."

"Was it an amicable parting?" Nick asked.

"Huh?"

"Did you both want to break up?" Schanke translated.

"Uh, no." Todd squirmed his stocky body in his seat. "Uh, Lexi kind of found out that I was sorta seeing somebody else at the same time."

"You were cheating on her?" Schanke interrupted.

"Well, yeah. But it didn't mean anything. Elisa didn't mean anything to me. She just had..."

Not wanting to hear the gory details of young love gone sour, Nick halted the boy's recital. "So Lexi broke up with you. Did you hate her for that?"

"Hate her?" squeaked the boy. "No, no way. I tried to get back together with her just last night. Lexi was the best thing that ever happened to me!"

"Did she want to get back together?"

"No, she told me to piss off and then took off with that Ryan guy." Todd shook his head slowly, eyes filling with tears. "If only I'd have tried harder to keep her, maybe she'd be alive now."

"Do you know of anybody who would have wanted to hurt her?" asked Nick.

"No, everybody liked Lexi. She was real easy to talk to, you know?"

"Had anything been bothering her lately?"

"No," the young man responded quickly, then he paused for an instant. "Yeah, yeah, there was something bugging her. She'd been nervous the last few weeks. Called me up once and yelled at me to stop calling her all the time. Told her it wasn't me. Lexi nearly never yelled."

"All right, so where were you at two A.M. today?"

"I just woke up." Seeing that both detectives were puzzled, he continued, "I was, uh, kind of tired so I had crashed on the couch in the party room for a while. Then somebody shook me and told me that Lexi was in trouble."

"Who woke you up?"

"I don't know. I was kind of out of it."

"Go on," Nick prompted.

"So I went over to Justin's room and went in the door. Then I saw that guy, Ryan, standing over Lexi with blood on his hands. I started yelling and somebody called the cops."

"So you didn't actually see the murder?"

"No, but I saw that guy standing over her."

"Did you see the knife in his hands?"

"No."

"There was nobody else in the room?"

"No."

"Thank you very much," Nick told the young man. "The prosecutor's office will be getting in touch with you."

"Yeah, sure. Just glad you got the guy," Todd responded, rising slowly to his feet. "Lexi didn't deserve to die like that."

"No one does," Knight told him as he followed Todd out the door to call in the next witness. Ushering the young man in, he indicated for him to be seated and asked if he objected being taped. Manning said he did not. Then the questions started.

"Please state your name."

"Justin Manning," the blond young man replied, looking younger than his twenty-one years.

"Where were you last night?"

"I was at a party on the fifth floor of the Eaton Square Marriott."

"Were you at the hotel the entire evening?"

"Yes, I got in about seven with some other guys."

"Did you know Lexi Craven?"

"Yes, she'd been my friend since we had chem lab together freshman year," Justin replied, a frown growing on his face.

"And when was that?"

"About two years ago."

"Did you know of anybody who would have wanted to hurt her?" asked Nick.

Shaking his head, Justin replied, "No, Lexi was really nice. Everybody liked her."

"No old boyfriends giving her a hassle?" Schanke questioned, thinking of Hobarth.

"Well..." Justin leaned forward towards the two detectives. "I mean, this doesn't matter since you caught the guy who did it and all, but..." He let his voice trail off.

"But what?" prompted Schanke before he took another sip of coffee.

"Todd, Todd Hobarth. He was Lexi's ex. They were arguing last night at the party."

"About what?"

"Lexi dumped Todd when she found out he was seeing another woman behind her back. Jeez, I sound like a real busy-body," Justin said, giving a weak smile. "A lot of women. You know how football players are."

"Do you think that Todd threatened her?" Nick asked.

Justin hesitated for a moment then replied carefully, "I don't know. She never said he did, but all I know is she didn't want to be in the same room with him at all."

"All right, so where were you at two A.M.?" Schanke took control of the questioning again.

"Trying to clean up the bathroom in my room." Noticing the detectives' puzzlement, he continued, "Brenda had thrown up in the sink. I couldn't leave it there all night. It smelled terrible."

"Uh huh. So how did you find out something had happened to Lexi?"

"I heard shouting in the hall."

"So you didn't actually see the body or anyone around it?"

"No, I just heard Todd yelling for an ambulance. Then the cops came and..."

"All right," the older detective interrupted. "If we have any more questions, we'll get in touch with you. Thanks for your help."

"Uh, sure, anything to help," the young man mumbled as he stood up and left the room.

Turning to his partner and stretching, Schanke asked, "Well, who's next?"

"Jennifer Chesterland. I'll go and get her."

"I need to talk to you," MacLeod said, standing in front of Detective Knight's desk at the police station.

Nick and Schanke glanced quickly at each other. In near unison, they replied, "We are not at liberty to discuss an ongoing murder investigation."

"But I have come up with some more information that may prove Richie's innocence," the Scotsman retorted.

"Well, that's different then. Why don't you give us the information, and we'll check it out?" Schanke replied, his words furring from all the caffeine he had been consuming.

Sensing that he was not being taken seriously by the older detective, he turned his gaze toward Knight. "I talked to Lexi Craven's sister, and she says that Lexi has been receiving threatening phone calls for the last several months." Not getting a response from either man, he angrily continued, "Don't either of you think that's somewhat significant?"

"Of course, we do," Nick replied smoothly. "We'll be sure to check it out."

"Uh huh, now why don't I believe that? Just because somebody looks guilty doesn't mean they are guilty. You can't make a snap judgment in something as important as murder!" MacLeod spat at the words, glaring at the two men.

"Hey, we're professionals. We don't judge people. We just gather evidence," Schanke replied.

"If you're so good at gathering evidence, why didn't you ever question Paul and Rosalind Craven as to whether they knew of anyone threatening Lexi?" Disgusted by the conversation, the Scotsman turned on his heels and marched out of the police station. For a moment, he could be seen out of the glass front doors, framed against the night.

Schanke merely shook his head at the interruption of their work, but for Nick, a memory started tickling the back of his mind. A memory of an angry Scotsman in the night.

* * * * *

"Mortal fools," LaCroix said distastefully, his lower lip curling.

Nicholas followed his master's gaze to a table nearby occupied by two men. The men were both drunk and laughing loudly, oblivious to LaCroix's and the other more serious patrons' disapproval. The two vampires had been sitting in the smoke-filled drinking establishment for hours. Nicholas had no idea why the older vampire had chosen this rather dull men's pub to pass the evening.

"Look at them, Nicholas," LaCroix continued. "They talk, they drink, they laugh, and none of it means anything. Tomorrow they could be dead."

"So they should sit around mourning that fact every moment they're alive?"

"No, but I want you to realize that their lives are meaningless. They are for your amusement and food, not your pity." LaCroix's light eyes stared unblinking at his convert.

Averting his eyes, looking back towards the two laughing men, Nicholas replied, "I think that they would disagree with you."

"Probably, but then again, the cow that they're eating would have probably disagreed with them if it had been asked." Leaning closer, his voice softened, "Nicholas, they die anyway. Why shouldn't their deaths be of some use?"

"Feeding us, you mean?" Nicholas shook his head, still staring at the other table. "That's not why Man was put on this earth to be used as cattle."

"Then why are they here at all?"

"I'm not sure. For the glory of God, perhaps?"

LaCroix chuckled a cold, dry laugh for a moment at his convert's answer. "Poor Nicholas, still the fool after all these years. What glory do these," the older vampire gestured at the mortals in the room, "pitiful being give to your precious God?"

Nicholas glanced around the room. It was filled with men in various states of inebriation and sobriety, laughing, eating, talking, squabbling over some small matter. It looked no different than the monkey house at the zoo. But still, these were people. He was still trying to think of a worthy reply to his master when LaCroix started speaking again.

"No answer? I thought not. They're nothing but cows, Nicholas, foolish cattle, stumbling around in the dark, waiting for the slaughter."

They sat in silence after LaCroix's pronouncement that humans were but foolish cattle. Nicholas considered the changes in his conscience from the time he had first crossed over to this moment. Killing had been easy. For centuries, the death of humans needed to feed his blood hunger had never troubled him. It had been as easy as the consumption of charred dead cow had been when he was mortal. But humans weren't cows, weren't animals. They had hopes, dreams, souls. How he envied them their souls. He had come to believe that it was wrong to kill them.

The crowd in the room started thinning out. A waiter appeared, asking if they intended to stay at the club for the night. LaCroix shook his head and motioned the man away.

"Go and arrange for a coach, Nicholas. I wish to go to the Osprey," LaCroix ordered. The Osprey was a club in London run by and for vampires.

Nodding, the younger vampire stood up and went to arrange for a carriage. One of the servers handed him his coat and LaCroix's. Shrugging into it, he headed back for the lounge where he had previously been drinking. There was no one in the room at all. Perhaps it was a small noise, or the scent of blood, that caught his attention. He looked up the stairs that led to the sleeping rooms and knew where LaCroix had gone. Bounding up the stairs, he pushed open the door to find the other vampire feeding on one of the men that had, a few short moments ago, been laughing downstairs. LaCroix greeted him with glowing eyes and a satiated smile but no words. Nicholas watched as he went over to the window of the room and stepped out into the night's air.

It was a lesson, Nicholas thought, as he checked the body. The man was dead as he expected. A lesson in the fleeting, unpredictably short life that was the lot of mortals.

"Get away from him!" a deep voice yelled at him from the doorway.

Nicholas turned away from the body and looked at the man now standing in the threshold. He recognized him as the Scotsman that had been drinking with the man that was now lying drained on the bed. He backed away slowly from the bed towards the window in the room.

The Scotsman, his eyes never leaving Nicholas, came over to the body and checked his friend's neck for a pulse. The hand that had searched for life came back damp with blood. The man stared at it for the briefest of moments, and then said, "You've killed him!"

"No, I'm sorry," Nicholas replied softly and started backing away even further from the mortal. The man's dark eyes were boring into him with rage and disbelief. With a small push, he jumped out the window into the night and flew to a soft landing below. Hearing a cry, he was shocked to see the man following him out the window. It was a three-story drop, and for a moment, he considered breaking the man's fall. That would only cause more trouble, he told himself immediately, and by then the man was on the ground, already rolling to an upright position. Seeing that the man was unhurt, Nicholas flew quickly down the dark alley away from the pub...

* * * * *

Nick glanced away from the front door he had been unconsciously staring at while he remembered. It explained why Ryan's friend, MacLeod, looked familiar to him. MacLeod looked exactly like the Scotsman from his memory right down to the dark, angry look that MacLeod had given him when confronting Schanke and him about his friend's innocence. *It can't be the same person*, the detective thought to himself. That was over a hundred years ago, and MacLeod was no vampire. He would have sensed that immediately. A coincidence, he decided. After eight hundred years, people were beginning to look alike.

* * * * *

Tessa Noel reflected that a courtroom in Canada looked much like a courtroom in the United States which resembled a courtroom in France. The judge faced the audience and defendant in a clear position of power, usually from a raised platform. She wondered what that meant psychologically. Probably something to do with one's parents, she decided. She shook her head, trying to get the nonsense train of thought from her mind. Duncan and she had discussed Richie's arraignment. They had decided

that Duncan would continue looking for clues to prove Richie's innocence, and she would provide moral support.

She had gotten to the courtroom early and secured a seat behind the lawyer Duncan had hired. *I wonder how much support I'll be. I can't believe I was yelling at him a day ago about something as silly as a delivery*, she thought guiltily. *"I suppose it always takes a crisis for you to realize how much people mean to you. How stupid..."* There was a stirring from the side of the room as two guards brought Richie in. *He looks so young and frightened. I wonder if that's what he's really feeling or if he knows that his cocky attitude won't do him any favors?* Tessa chided herself for being cynical. *He really liked that girl, and he found her dead. Now he's being accused of her murder. Of course, he's frightened.*

She noticed Richie looking over towards her as he took his place beside his lawyer and barrister. She gave him a smile and leaned forward to talk to him, hand gently on his shoulder. "Duncan's story he couldn't be here, Richie. He's following up some clues."

"That's okay, Tess. He's gotta find the person who did this to Lexi."

"I'm sure he will. You know Duncan," Tessa replied reassuringly.

Richie nodded. His lawyer started discussing some points of the case with him. The judge entered the room and the arraignment began. It was over very quickly. Richard Ryan was accused of murdering Lexi Craven and was ordered held without bail until the trial could take place, trial date to be set the following week.

* * * * *

"And you didn't see anything out of the ordinary that night? Any strange people hanging around?"

"I don't know, really. There were so many people that I didn't know," the girl explained. "I was dancing in one of the rooms when somebody yelled out that Lexi had been hurt. Then the paramedics and police showed up."

Duncan dredged up a smile he didn't feel and thanked her very much. They had been standing in the hallway as the girl and her friends tried to get their luggage down to the lobby. The last of the partygoers were leaving the hotel. This filled MacLeod with a sense of urgency. If he didn't find out something soon, he would never be able to track down all these people.

"You know," the girl called out to him from further down the hall.

"Yes?"

"I think Todd is still here. He was Lexi's ex-boyfriend and was there right when... Well, he found her..."

"Which room is he in?"

"Five hundred."

"Thank you," said MacLeod who started walking down the corridor to that particular room number. Todd Hobarth... Rosalind had mentioned him as the possible source of those troubling phone calls to Lexi. He knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

Footsteps approached the door but did not open it. "Are you the police?"

"No, I'm a friend of Paul Craven's. Name's Duncan MacLeod."

The door opened slowly to admit him. The young man in the room sat tiredly back down on the bed after letting him in.

Hobarth had clearly been going through a very rough time. He had a two-day growth of beard, unkempt hair, and had a hole-filled Vikings football jersey. The blue eyes that Lexi had once compared to the ocean were bloodshot and bleary.

"I am sorry to trouble you, but there are some questions I'd like to ask you."

"Can't think of anything that I haven't told the police already. Besides, they've already got the guy who did it," Todd responded with a sigh, running a hand through his tangled hair.

"Well, there are a few things that have been distressing Lexi's father. I'm trying to find out some information for him." Duncan disliked lying, but he didn't feel he would get much information from Lexi's friends by telling them he was trying to help her supposed killer.

"Okay."

Deciding that getting to the point was the best tactic, MacLeod asked, "Were you making harassing phone calls to Lexi the past few months?"

"What!!" Todd focused his attention on his visitor.

"Were you making harassing phone calls to Lexi the last few months?"

"I heard you the first time. What kind of question is that?" protested the young man. "Who told you I was?"

"I'm asking if you did or not."

"No, of course, I didn't! Who said I was?"

"No one said you did. I'm trying to find out who did make the calls." Hobarth's reaction along with Rosalind's assessment that he had not made the calls convinced Duncan that he wasn't the caller.

"Well, it wasn't me," Todd started again.

"Did you know she was getting threatening calls?"

"Yeah," the young man nodded affirmatively. "She accused me of doing it. Told her I wasn't. She seemed to believe me. Lex always seemed to know when I was lying to her or not."

"Can you think of anybody who would have made those calls? Maybe somebody who didn't like her..."

"Everybody liked her."

"How about somebody who liked her more than she like them, perhaps?"

Todd shook his head negatively. "Sorry, can't think of anybody."

"Well, if you do--" Duncan held out a card with his hotel room and phone number on it. "Please contact me. It could be very important." He stood up to leave.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Hobarth nodded, not getting up from the bed.

"Thank you." MacLeod opened the door, then a question that had been bothering him popped out. "Todd, how did you know that Lexi was hurt?"

"Huh?"

"You were in another room, weren't you, from where the murder took place?"

"Yeah, I was down the hall, uh, resting on a couch."

"So how did you know she was in trouble?"

"Somebody shook me and told me," Todd responded slowly, his eyes half-closed as he tried to remember through the haze the alcohol had put on his memory at the time.

"Who was it?"

"Uh, not sure. Can't remember." The implications started to enter the young man's brain. Somebody had known something was wrong. How could that be? He looked at Duncan for the first time. "I don't know."

"If you do remember, please give me a call."

"I'll do that," Todd responded, shaking his head with some determination. He now had some questions of his own that needed answering.

Duncan reentered the dimly lit hallway, nearly stepping in someone's leftover room service breakfast. There was no one else in the corridor. He felt that there might be a chance of Todd remembering something else that night, but it wasn't enough. He walked over to the room where Lexi had been killed. The tape barriers the police had left had been removed except for a few strands on the wall by the door. He knocked on the door, not expecting any answer. To his surprise, a young man answered the door.

"Yes?"

"Hello, my name's Duncan MacLeod. I'm investigating the murder of Lexi Craven."

"You a cop?" the man asked, drawing the door close to him so MacLeod wouldn't be able to see into the room.

"No, just a friend of Lexi's father. Were you a friend..."

"Yes, I was here that night, and yes, I was a friend of Lexi's," the other man snapped irritably. He was blond and neatly dressed in a faded denim shirt and khaki pants.

Duncan held up his hands placatingly. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm just trying to get some answers."

"About what?"

"About what happened to Lexi," Duncan replied calmly, puzzled at the young man's obvious hostility. "Is it okay if I ask you a few questions, Mr..."

"Manning, Justin Manning. Yeah, sure. But they've already caught the guy who did it. Why the questions?"

"Her father still has some questions he'd like answered."

"How're Mr. and Mrs. Craven doing?" Justin asked, concern in his voice. He opened the door all the way and gestured for Duncan to enter.

The sudden attitude change threw Duncan only for a moment. He went into the room and glanced around. There was nothing to indicate that a murder had taken place there. It was just another nondescript hotel room except for the fact that the carpet had been removed. "They're taking it very hard, of course."

"Tell them if they need anything, just to give me a call," Justin offered. "I've known Lexi for years."

"Well, then, you'd be a good person to ask," the highland responded. "Do you know who had been making threatening phone calls to Lexi for the last few months?"

There was no expression change on Justin's face. With a slight shake of his head, he said, "No, no, I don't." A look of concentration passed over the young man's face. "But, you know, Lexi told me about those calls. They really had her worried. She thought, well, she thought that Todd was doing it."

"Todd Hobarth?"

"Yeah, her ex-boyfriend. You know, he was running around on her. He's a real asshole."

MacLeod didn't respond to the comment for a moment, then he nodded. "Thanks for the information. I'll look into it." He started to leave, Justin following him to the door, ready to shut it behind him. Suddenly, he put a hand on the door and looked at Justin in the eye. "By the way, what are you doing in this room?"

The question didn't seem to throw the college student at all. He smiled slightly and said, "I feel closer to Lexi here somehow."

"Oh. Here's my card. If you can think of anything else concerning those calls, let me know."

Justin took the card and assured Duncan that, of course, he would call if anything came to mind. He then shut the door.

Finding himself again in an empty corridor, MacLeod started to walk away, then glanced back at Room 502 thoughtfully. He went over to another room and knocked. Maybe there were other students that hadn't yet left.

* * * * *

The sun had already set by the time he made it to the police station. He had talked to Tessa and asked her to meet him there. He needed to talk to the detectives again and make them find out who had made those phone calls.

"Duncan!" Tessa called out.

MacLeod pushed through the crowd at the entrance to the police station. It was evidently a busy night for the Toronto police. He greeted his lover with a quick kiss. "How's Richie?"

"He's holding up, all right." She had talked to him earlier in the day to inform him of the outcome of Richie's arraignment. "How about you? Any luck?"

"I think so," he replied. Justin Manning had struck MacLeod very oddly. It wasn't just the young man's mood swing. Why would one want to stay in the room where one's good friend was killed? However, he still had no evidence against Justin or anyone else. The phone calls, he had decided were the key. He needed to have them traced, and since he couldn't get the records himself, it was time to convince two very annoying detectives to do so. "Have you seen Detective Knight?"

"Yes, he came in an hour or so ago."

"Let's go talk to him, then." He went to the desk sergeant and arranged to meet with the detective. They were escorted to a barren room with a small table and a broken chair.

"Look, Mr. MacLeod, I understand your concern for your friend, but I cannot discuss this case with you," Knight said straight off.

"I know that, but what I have to say is very important."

"Go ahead," Nick gestured for him to continue.

"I think that whoever was threatening Lexi for months killed her and set up Richie to take the blame."

"And?"

"Whoever woke up Todd Hobarth and had him go and discover the body."

"But how do you know it was the same person making the phone calls?"

"Because it makes sense, that's why. Someone as been menacing Lexi for months, and then she turns up dead. If Richie hadn't been with her that night, it would had been somebody else."

Nick shook his head very slightly. "But you don't have any hard evidence of that, do you?"

"No, we don't, but..." Duncan started to respond.

"No 'buts'." The detective paused for a moment and looked compassionately at both people in front of him. He knew he shouldn't be discussing police proceedings to civilians, but these two just weren't going away. He admired their devotion to Ryan. "Your loyalty to your friend is admirable. However, unless you have something concrete to tell me, the case is closed."

"What kind of evidence would you need to reopen it?" Tessa quickly asked, sensing her lover's growing frustration.

"A witness saying they saw someone else entering the room where the girl was killed would be helpful. A motive for her death, anything that says that it wasn't some act of violence committed by a drunken kid."

"Can't you at least find out who was making those calls! Somebody was trying to threaten Lexi. Surely that's enough to suggest someone had a motive?"

"Possibly. It's just that the evidence against your friend is pretty tight."

"He didn't do it," MacLeod stated firmly, joining the conversation.

"You're sure of that?"

"As sure as I am of my own name. Sometimes people appear guilty until you look closely." Duncan took a step closer to Nick and locked eyes with the detective. Haven't you ever been falsely accused of something?"

For an instant, Nick found himself looking back through time, staring at a man who looked so much like the one in front of him, accusing him of murder, blaming him for slaughtering the man's friend, a death Nick had no hand in. "Yes," he forced out through a constricted throat. "Yes, I have been."

"Then you understand why we have to help our friend any way we can," responded Duncan, still maintaining eye contact. "Richie didn't murder that girl; someone else did. We have to find out who it was before an injustice occurs."

Nick nodded slightly, not knowing exactly why he agreed to help. "All right, I'll look into it."

"Thank you," MacLeod replied. He took Tessa's arm, and they made their way out of the police station back to the hotel.

* * * * *

Todd lay on the flowered bed spread and stared at the spackled ceiling. He concentrated on the night of the party, trying to remember it exactly as it had occurred, one even after the other. It was hard -- the episodes were disconnected from the haze of alcohol. Sometimes they seemed to jerk forward like a badly edited film. His body tensed as he approached the time when he had found Lexi's body. Forcing himself to remain calm, he thought about passing out on the couch. The piece of furniture seemed to whirl in place as he lay there. Then, finally, the falling sensation that indicated drunken unconsciousness instead of sleep. A hand shaking his shoulder, struggling to wake up enough to make the jiggling stop. Then a voice, prompting him, urging him to get up, that Lexi was in trouble. Looking up at the face that was already turning away from him. A familiar face, the face of someone he knew -- Justin.

He sat up and nodded to himself. It had been Justin that had shaken him awake. It made no sense though. Justin was Lexi's friend; why hadn't he helped her? He stood up and took a card out of his back pocket and began dialing the phone. "Hello? Mr. MacLeod, this is Todd Hobarth. I've been trying to remember what happened that night, and I finally came up with something, I think. The person who woke me up to tell me Lexi was hurt was Justin, Justin Manning. It's still real fuzzy, but I'm pretty certain." He listened to Duncan's reply for a moment. "Yeah, I'm still at the hotel. See you in about twenty minutes then."

He hung up the phone. The more the thought about it, the more certain he was that it had been Justin. It simply didn't make much sense. *Justin was still here earlier -- don't think he's left yet.* Todd strode purposefully out of the room, the first time since Lexi's death he had been able to pull himself together enough to do anything. Walking down the dimly lit corridor, he banged on Manning's door. "Justin, hey Justin! You in there?"

There was no answer, and he tried again, yelling a little louder this time. A door opened, not the one he was knocking on. A voice called out, "Todd? Hey, Todd, I'm down here."

Turning towards the speaker, he saw it was Justin, head poked outside a door. "I need to talk to you."

"Sure, come on in."

Walking to the room, he glanced up at the room number. It was 502. Entering the room, he stared in disbelief at the other man. "What the hell are you doing in here? This is where she was killed. That's really sick, Justin."

Justin, who had been regarding Todd's entrance warmly, changed his expression instantly. "Look, Hobarth, what the hell do you want anyway?"

"I wanna ask you a question."

"What?" Justin retorted, crossing his arms in front of him, turn half-away from his visitor.]

"Did you kill Lexi?" Todd blurted out. He had originally meant to ask if the other young man had been the one to wake him up, but then he decided that the direct approach would be more effective. Justin turned totally away from him, shoulders shaking. "Come on, Jus, tell me what happened," he urged, taking a step toward his friend.

The punch hit him so fast that he had no time to react. Todd staggered backwards and down to his knees. Bringing his arms up, he was able to ward off the next punch and tried to get back on his feet. He had never considered Justin a physical threat. The guy was a bit of a nerd, and Todd played all types of sports. Swinging, he tried to connect, but his attacker side-stepped at the last instant. Something slammed into the side of his head, and he found himself lying on the floor.

"You just don't understand, Todd. I was keeping her safe, safe from assholes like you who just use good girls like her," Justin explained as he kicked Todd hard in the stomach. "Lexi was pure. I had to keep her that way. You just don't understand."

"You killed her," Hobarth gasped out. He tried to get up, but his body wasn't responding to the commands his brain was sending. "How could you do that to her? Her family?"

"I had to, that's why. Her family would understand. It's just scum like you that can't comprehend what virtue means."

"No, no, they don't understand, either. You took her away from everybody, Justin. You just took her away." His voice sounded distant to his own ears.

"You scum!" Manning kicked the prone man again. "I'll go explain it to them. They'll understand. You'll see. I'll make you see." Grabbing his jacket, Justin exited the room.

Todd lay on the floor, trying to comprehend what had just happened. *Gotta get up and get some help*, he thought. The act of trying to sit up made him supremely dizzy. *I'll just wait a minute, then I'll try it again. Just another minute...* The room seemed to shift on its side though he wasn't moving. Then came oblivion.

* * * * *

"Exactly what are you doing?" Schanke asked through a sip of coffee.

"I'm on hold with the phone company," said Nick, switching the phone from one ear to another. "And what are you doing here?"

"I thought maybe you could use my help."

"You don't even know what I'm doing," the blonde man replied, knowing that Schanke was still afraid to go home to his wife, but not going to miss the opportunity to yank his chain.

"Well, if you'd tell me, partner, I'd know."

"I'm trying to find out who made those threatening phone calls to Lexi Craven. Yes," he said quickly to assure the phone company representatives of his continued existence, "I'm still here."

"The Craven case?" the other detective responded with puzzlement. "We're finished with that case. We need to get to work on these--" He flicked some of the files that were stacked neatly on his partner's desk.

"Sometimes people are innocent, Schank. It just looks like they're guilty."

"Hey, I know that. I am a detective, you know."

"Yes, that was 492?" Nick said into the phone and then scribbled an address on a slip of paper. "And you'll fax over the list of calls? That's perfect. Thank you very much." He hung up the phone.

"Well?" Schanke inquired.

"There were one hundred and two phone calls to Lexi Craven's house from one location during a two-month period."

"So? She was a kid. That's what kids do -- talk on the phone."

"None of the calls lasted over thirty seconds."

"Well, that's different. Who made the calls? Todd Hobarth?"

"No, it was Justin Manning." Nick shrugged on his black leather jacket. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"The Eaton Square Marriott. I think that Manning is still there."

"Great, something to keep me awake," Schanke said to no one in particular. He grabbed another cup of coffee on his way out of the precinct.

* * * * *

Duncan knocked more loudly on the door. "Todd, Todd, it's Duncan MacLeod!" he called out.

"He doesn't seem to be around," Tessa commented.

"It's very odd. He really sounded anxious on the phone." MacLeod looked perplexed for a moment, then started walking down the hall. "Maybe he decided to go talk to Manning himself?" At Room 502, he banged on the door. There was no response, but something felt wrong about what was happening. Trying the door knob, he found it unlocked. They both saw Todd lying on the floor, face bloodied.

"Oh no!" Tessa cried out. She immediately went to the phone and dialed the operator. "Hello, it's an emergency. Room 502. We need an ambulance right away!"

While his lover was summoning help, Duncan bent over the beaten man. Todd stirred at the touch. "Don't move," MacLeod urged.

"I'm okay," Hobarth whispered, throat dry.

"You really look it, too. Did Justin do this?"

"Yeah, yeah, didn't know the little creep had it in him," Todd forced out as he tried to get up.

Duncan put a hand on his shoulder. "No, no, don't move. An ambulance is on its way." The Scotsman accepted a towel that Tessa handed him and pressed it against the injured man's head.

"No, gotta get up."

"Why?"

"Justin said something about goin' to talk to Lexi's parents," he shrugged to say. "He's crazy... Might, might hurt 'em."

"What's going on here?" Detective Knight's authoritative voice boomed into the area.

Tessa and Duncan looked up and saw the two Toronto detectives entering the room.

"He's been attacked," Tessa explained.

"You call an ambulance?" Schanke asked as he bent over the man's body. He saw Tessa nod and took a look at the head wound.

"Who did this?" Nick queried.

"Justin Manning," MacLeod replied, standing up and letting the detective inspect Todd's injuries.

"He was the one making the phone calls to Lexi Craven," the blonde detective informed him as he moved back from the victim, trying to stay away from the tantalizing sight of blood.

"He was also the one who woke Todd up to go and find Richie standing over her body," Duncan added. "But that's going to have to wait until later. We've got to go to Paul Craven's right now!"

"Why?"

"Because Justin is headed toward his house to explain why he killed Lexi, and I don't think--" MacLeod's Scottish accent became thicker with worry for his friend. "--That he's just going to drop off a bouquet of flowers."

"Probably not," Nick replied.

"I'll wait with Todd," Tessa volunteered. "The ambulance should be here any minute."

"It doesn't look too bad," Schanke interjected. He let Tessa start to gently hold the towel and stood up. "Let's go, partner."

"I'm going with you," MacLeod stated firmly as the other two men hurried down the hallway. At their looks of protest, he added, "I know where the Cravens live; you don't. They're my friends."

"Fine, whatever," Schanke responded, trying to keep up with Nick's pace. They ran down the stairs and jumped into the parked Cadillac.

* * * * *

"So you see, I had to kill her. You understand, don't you?" Justin pleaded with Lexi's parents.

The two people looked at each other. It had taken Lexi's friend ten minutes of disjointed rambling to come to the point of his visit. The sinking feeling had started much sooner, nearly as soon as he had entered the house. The question was how to get him out of the house before he hurt them or their one remaining child.

* * * * *

They turned down an ordinary-looking neighborhood street. Duncan told them to stop several houses away from the Cravens'. He pointed out the nondescript two-story brick house that he had visited several times.

"All right, Schanke, you cover the front. I'll go around back," Nick told his partner. Both detectives were checking their guns as they exited from the Cadillac. MacLeod started to get out of the car, also.

"Oh, no, you don't," the mortal detective said, shaking his finger. "You're staying right here."

"I want to help!"

"I know that, MacLeod, but the best thing you can do is stay right here. We're professionals; we'll handle this," Detective Knight informed him. The last thing he needed around was somebody besides Schanke to keep track of.

"Yeah, we're professionals. Keep a-listenin' to the radio, why don't you?" Schanke suggested, straightening up in his polyester weave suit.

Knowing that arguing would be futile, Duncan sat back in his seat, patiently waiting until the detectives were no longer in sight so he could leave the car.

* * * * *

"It was important for Lexi to remain pure. I loved her. She had to be perfect," Justin rambled. There had been no break in his chaotic monologue.

"We understand, Justin," Paul Craven said gently, trying to reassure the boy. "It's all right. Why don't you sit down?" He gestured toward the couch.

"I'm so glad you understand," the blond young man beamed. "I was so afraid you wouldn't."

"Of course, we do, Justin," Elaine Craven comforted. "Just relax. Would you like something to drink?"

"Uh, no, no, no, thank you." Justin sank down on the couch and looked at Lexi's parents with a contented smile on his face. Things were going just perfectly. He liked the Cravens. They had always been very nice to him when Lexi had brought him over for dinner. Lexi had always been inviting people over to her house, especially those students whose families were far away. She had been such a nice girl.

"You sure? I've got a pot of coffee on."

"What's going on?" a childish voice called out from the stairs that led from the living room to the upstairs bedrooms.

Paul barely kept himself from cursing out loud. Rosalind had been sleeping when Justin had arrived at their house. He had hoped that she would remain asleep and, hopefully, away from harm. Justin was obviously unbalanced. He had already killed once. *Please*, he pleaded inside his head, *please don't let him hurt my little girl!*

"Nothing, honey," Paul replied. "It's just Justin. He came over to visit. Go back to bed."

"Justin?" Rosalind said softly, recognizing her sister's friend. "What are you doing here so late?" The child finished descending the stairs and came into the living room.

"I'm just talking to your parents about Lexi, Rosalind," he responded as he watched the girl stand near her parents. He had never noticed before how much she looked like Lexi. Oh, they weren't identical, but they had the same, beautiful inner spirit, he could tell. So much light inside that would soon be darkened, tarnished. There were so many evil, impure people in the world. Rosalind's unblemished state would be lost soon, so soon. He could save her. He would save her just like he saved Lexi. Smiling, he took a step toward the little girl who instinctively moved back a step. "Don't be afraid, honey," he soothed, a gentle smile creasing his face.

Justin's next move was so quick that neither the Cravens had a chance to prevent it. With one swift jerk, he was holding Rosalind in front of them, a knife much like the one that had killed her sister at her throat.

* * * * *

Damn! thought Nick. He had circled around the back of the house and was peering through a window. He could see the Cravens seated on a couch with Lexi's killer facing them, a knife held on a little girl's throat. He thought about shooting the young man, but Manning was moving around too much. There was no chance of getting a clean shot. He looked around. There was a neat row of shrubs along the back of the house broken only by a set of sliding glass doors that led to a small concrete patio. The question was how to get into the house fast enough to grab the knife before it did any damage. The Cravens had already lost one child already. He would not allow them to lose another. Then he spotted a staircase not far from where the young man was pacing back and forth. If he could get inside the house and come down those stairs, he'd have the element of surprise. Glancing up, he saw a second story window. Flying up to it, he gently pried it open with a minimum amount of noise and entered the house.

Duncan had come along the back of the house. He saw no sign of Detective Knight. The other detective was stationed in the front of the house near the front door. He went behind a large evergreen shrub and cautiously peered inside. What he saw made his heart speed up. There was Paul and his wife seated on the couch and their little girl being held by Justin, a knife laid dangerously against her small neck. MacLeod ducked quickly and tried to think of how to help. If he burst into the room, Justin would more than likely have time to slit Rosalind's throat before he could stop him. Maybe if he could find Knight, one of them could go in and distract him while the other disarmed him. He looked around for the Toronto detective. Knight had gone around the back of the house -- he knew it -- but he could not spot him. Pushing himself up again, he took another look inside the house.

Nick moved silently down the stairs. Manning was still rambling on to the Cravens about purity and love. He shook his head sadly for a brief moment, then proceeded forward. Glancing around, he spotted MacLeod's face in one of the windows. Thinking quickly, he raised his hand slightly and made a knocking gesture.

Duncan caught the sign and nodded. He began tapping on the window, trying to distract the house's occupants.

"What's that?" Justin asked and looked towards the sound. At the same time, he tightened his grip on the child. She whimpered slightly in response. The Cravens turned their heads to look at the sound which came from in back of them. So it was only Duncan that saw what happened next. One moment, Justin was standing there. Then there was a dark blur coming at him, zooming impossibly fast and level with the young man's arm. Then he was flung across the room. The knife was now in one of Detective Knight's hands, the other rested comfortably on Rosalind's shoulder.

"He flew," Duncan whispered to himself. He had seen everything that had happened in the room. There had been no way that Knight could have jumped at Justin. He had come at him perfectly level, five

feet above the ground. "That's not possible," he added. Leaving the bushes, he knocked on the glass doors to be let in.

Nick put the cuffs on Justin and hauled him to his feet. The young man was barely conscious. Schanke had come bursting into the room as soon as he'd heard the sound of Justin being thrown across the room. He had entered the house through the front door and had been making his way cautiously back to the living room. "I'll take him to the car, Schank. Why don't you tell the Cravens to come down later this morning and make an official statement?"

"Yeah, they've had enough for one night," his partner agreed.

Paul and Elaine were hugging their daughter and enjoying the sensation of being safe again.

* * * * *

Duncan leaned against the desk, waiting patiently for Knight to get off the home. Justin was safely ensconced in a cell. There had been a message from Tessa when they had gotten back to the police station. Todd was going to be just fine. They were keeping him overnight for observation, but he would undoubtedly be released the next day. If she didn't hear from him before she left the hospital, she would go down to the station and wait for him there. She hadn't yet arrived, so he assumed she was in transit.

"Yes, eight A.M., thank you," Nick finished his conversation. He'd arranged for Ryan to be released in the morning, which, he noted with some concern, was going to be very soon. *Someday, I'll see a sunrise again*, he promised himself. "It's all set, just go to this address." He handed a slip of paper to Duncan. "And you can pick up your friend at eight."

Duncan nodded as he took the paper. It was only three hours until eight. Maybe he and Tessa wouldn't bother trying to get any sleep before they picked up Richie. A drive to the lake to watch the sun come up sounded more appealing.

He looked over at the detective, trying to decide what to say. There had been no way for Nick to have made that jump onto Justin. He would have had to fly, and humans couldn't fly. One couldn't say to someone, "I think you might not be human. I saw you fly, and I think I recognize you from London one hundred years ago." He knew that Nick couldn't have been responsible for Paul's death. The detective was no murderer. Shaking his head almost imperceptibly, he decided that there was no use confronting Knight with what he'd seen.

Seeing the other man shake his head, Nick asked, "What? Can't read my writing?"

"Oh no, it's fine," Duncan assured him. "Just trying to clear my head. Been a long night."

"Definitely."

"I'd like to thank you, Nick," MacLeod stated, locking eyes with the detective. "Thank you for believing us when we told you it couldn't had been Richie that killed Lexi."

Giving a slight, knowing smile, Knight replied, "Hey, I know what it's like to be falsely accused of something. I'm just glad we caught the real killer."

The two men scrutinized each other. There was more to be said, each felt, but it couldn't be. They shook hands. The moment was interrupted by a loud snore. The two turned toward the noise. Detective Schanke was asleep at his desk, head buried in a soft mound of paperwork. They both grinned and Nick went over to his friend.

"Hey, Schanke," he said. When no response was forthcoming, he poked the dark-haired man on the arm and said more loudly, "Hey, Schanke, wake up! The doughnut man's here."

"What?" Schanke replied blearily, head raising off the desk slightly. "Order me two chocolate ones, will ya, Knight?" His head started traveling back to the papers.

This is getting ridiculous, Nick thought. He gave his partner's chair a quick swirl, spinning the man towards him. Schanke's head shot up in surprise. Leaning forward, Nick stared penetratingly into his friend's eyes. "Go home," he commanded.

"Go home?"

"Go home."

"I gotta get out of here," Schanke said abruptly, standing up. He grabbed his coat and called out on his way to the door, "I have to go home."

Duncan looked at Knight questioningly. Nick merely shrugged in response. "Guess he was tired."

* * * * *

"Myra," Schanke called out as he entered the house. Tossing his coat on the couch, he yawned and went in search of his wife. "Hey, Myra, where are you?" Not getting a response, he shuffled towards the bedroom, loosening his tie and belt. *Maybe she's not home*, he thought. *That would be great! I need to get some sleep. Too tired to argue about anything.* Another yawn split his face. He flipped on the bedroom light and froze. There was Myra, lying in their bed, dressed in the low-cut, red-laced teddy that he had bought her a few Valentine Days' ago. She smiled seductively at him.

"Uh, Myra, what's going on?" he managed to stutter. Her answer was a finger beckoning him to bed.

Oh well, kids are great, right?

* * * * *

"That one looks nice, Richie," Tessa commented as she watched the young man try on a suit jacket. They were trying to purchase appropriate clothes to go to Lexi's funeral. They had stayed in Toronto past the closing date of the convention in order to attend the service.

"Yeah, it seems to fit okay." Richie shrugged his shoulders and crossed his arms, trying to see if the jacket had enough give to it.

"It looks classier than the last one."

"Probably costs a lot more, tot." He started searching the garment for a price tag. As usual, it was hard to find. "It seems stupid to be here worrying about what clothes to wear."

"It shows your respect for the dead, Richie. It's important," the artist replied, walking over to Richie. She pulled at the back collar of the jacket and lifted out the price tag. Raising her eyebrows slightly, she continued, "And don't worry about the price. I'll take care of it."

Ryan started to protest, but Tessa raised a hand. "No, please. You've been through a rough time. There's no need to worry about anything else right now."

"Thanks, Tessa," Richie replied. For a moment, he was silent, trying to think how to phrase what he wanted to say next. Probably better just to keep it simple, he decided. "And thanks, thanks a lot for standing by me. Coming to the arraignment and all. I just want you to know... well, you know how much that meant to me." He looked at the Frenchwoman for a few seconds.

Tessa smiled at the young man for a moment and let a wave of fondness come over her. Friends were so hard to find -- good friends, especially. "What else could I do? You're my friend."

The two looked at each other in understanding. Tessa broke the moment. "You'll need a tie."

"How about this one?" Richie pointed to a pink and green paisley one.

"No," she shook her head in mock horror. "Definitely not. This one would be a much better choice." Tessa picked up another, much more subdued one.

"You're sure, now? How are you matching colors?" he quipped. The two laughed at the small joke as Tessa put the tie on Richie and knotted it.

* * * * *

The doors to the police station opened briefly, the light flooding the darkened street for a moment. Natalie and Nick walked down towards the street where Nick Caddy was parked. Schanke was sitting on the hood eating a gyros with many napkins on his lap so that nothing would drip out on the pristine car. The detective had finally had some sleep and was looking much better.

Swallowing a bit bite of lamb, the homicide detective gestured to the car and commented to his partner, "See? All nice and clean. Even got the outside waxed for you."

"The question is -- how does it smell inside?" Knight replied, narrowing his eyes in judgment. He opened the car door and stuck his head into the interior. Taking a deep breath, he was overwhelmed by the scent of pine. Gagging ever so slightly, he pulled his head out of the car. "It smells like a forest."

"Yeah, well, that's the only thing they found that could cover up the garlic smell. Did you know that even washing the upholstery four times cannot get out the scent of garlic?" Schanke looked first at Nick and then Natalie.

"No, I didn't know that," Knight sighed. "I suppose pine-fresh is better than garlic-old."

"Definitely," Dr. Lambert agreed. "Did you get me one of those?" she said, point to the gyros.

"Yeah, here you go." The dark-haired detective handed her a dripping gyros.

Natalie unwrapped her late-night snack and started munching it. She took a closer look at Nick's car. "You know, wherever you got this done did a great job, Schank."

"My cousin, Dom. he owns a place that cleans cars up for rental companies and dealers."

"Hmmm... You know, my car could really use a good cleaning-out," she commented, running a hand along the highly waxed car door. "How does it smell?" Sticking her head in, she took a deep whiff of the piney freshness of the interior. At the same time, she brought the hand in that was carrying the gyros. "Wow, that's strong. Do they have anything lemony?"

Exiting from the car, Natalie bumped her head ever so slightly which caused her hand to loosen its grip on the gyros. It fell, somehow managing to loosen itself from its napkin wrappings onto the passenger seat. She stared at it for a split-second, then glanced over at the two detectives and gave a tentative apologetic smile. Schanke had seen what had occurred and grinned broadly at her before taking another bite of his snack. Nick had not seen what happened and returned her smile for other reasons. The reforming vampire glanced at his two grinning friends and asked, "What?"

COMES WINTER

by Maddog

the mirror tells me
the horses have run their course
and nothing will bring the years back
my hair is gray and faded
yours still the color of the sun
the sun you never see, Nicholas
I'm sorry
I couldn't make you human
let you see the flowers in the day
a rainbow against the skyline
a child with your eyes
ah, Nick, we never danced
until after dawn
may you find your dream
but for now, go
to new friends,
a new life
how many lives you've had
and I've but this fading one
go now,
before I change my mind
and give in to temptation
to stay with you in darkness
go now,
the dawn is coming
and I wish to see it one last time

ON THE WINGS OF THE KNIGHT #2

Authors' Note:

This story was three years in the making. This is not to imply that we labored continuously over each phrase, crafting it perfectly on a daily basis but that the story paused for months at a time on several occasions... The reasons were many: Sharon's two major spinal surgeries, a move -- for a year to a vocational rehab school -- and back, complete career change and her mother's and grandfather's major health problems. At the same time, Melanie also moved twice-- building a house between moves -- changed jobs twice, and continued to raise three hellions... uh, children.

Through it all Ann Hupe never gave up on us. Thanks to her patience and perseverance, Hostages is now before you. Also, thanks are due to both families for putting up with our very long phone calls, even longer lunches (spent working out plot ideas, of course!) and late night typing/printing sessions. Not to mention the viewing (over and over and over) of countless episodes of the shows. (We were just watching to be sure the dialogue, etc., was correct. Yeah, right!) Thanks to David Weber and Craig Lee for the help with the battle scenes, we couldn't've killed them right without ya... And a special thanks to Mel, for the gorse bush...

The first pages will let you know that this adventure pre-date Tessa's and Schanke's deaths, Richie's resurrection, and Stonetree's departure. Many rewrites occurred because of the developing timelines on both shows. Duncan's participation in the Rising of 1745 was especially irritating since we had placed him half a world away... But, looking back, it's been a wonderful experience, both in terms of learning more about writing and developing a fledgling friendship. And the good news is, we haven't killed each other (yet) and have become closest friends.

Any comments, questions, or constructive criticism is welcomed. We'd love to hear what you think. (We think!) Thanks for reading -- and enjoy!

Melanie Phillips
170 Ebenezer Road
Greer, SC 29651-8240
(864) 675-9451

Sharon L. Rice
406 Penarth Drive
Greenville, SC 29611
(864) 246-7448

Darkness. And suddenly out of the darkness, a flame.

It briefly illumined the craggily handsome features of a man with eyes of infinity. As he lit his cigar, the fiery light cast those well-formed features into a satanic mask.

The light flickered and went out. Out of the darkness a voice spoke -- a voice as mellow and rich as fine brandy with words like shards of glass. "Well, gentlemen, it seems we have no choice. Morrison must be taken, *toute de suite*. We must make an example of him so the rest of our organization will realize the price of betrayal."

"But, sir -- if he's been to the police, won't they be protecting him?"

"Perhaps. *Il ne faire rien*. It does not matter. Damage control must be complete. Without him, they are nothing. However, it may perhaps be wise to learn from our contacts who is conducting the investigation. We may be able to find weaknesses we can utilize. See to it."

"Yes, sir. And Morrison?"

"Obtain him. But do not terminate him until I have had the chance to question him. It is imperative that we learn the extent of the damage, *n'est-ce pas*?"

"Very well, sir."

And the darkness was again complete...

* * * * *

Nicholas Knight was awakened by his partner's voice on the answering machine. Before glancing at the clock, he sensed it must be close to dusk.

Six o'clock. Twilight in Canada's cold, early spring. Nick quelled the wistful longing to be able to see a Canadian spring day. He forced himself to concentrate on Schanke's message.

"Yo, Knight, our luck's changing. Morrison's decided to testify. Six detectives from Old Town are bringin' him in now. I still don't see how Stonetree could let Old Town get the nod for picking him up since you'n me made the first contact, but that's politics, right? So wakey-wakey and join the party. Believe you me, he's got some interesting stories to tell. This could really be big, Nick. We're talking about uncovering a major network of murder-for-hire, drugs, illegal arms and terrorism for much of North America. So get up, partner!"

Nick lay there a moment longer, fighting the grogginess that momentarily followed the complete loss of consciousness he called sleep. Then, rising, he padded downstairs to the kitchen, fighting the strength of the need that drove him to the refrigerator and the bottles that waited there.

Hesitating for a moment, he grabbed a bottle, uncorked it and drank thirstily. He brought the bottle down and stared at it, hating the pulsing need, hating the thick red fluid that met that need. In his youthful appearing face, ancient eyes filled with an eternity of anguish. Again he pushed the pain away.

Carrying the bottle to the piano, he sat down, drank again, placed the bottle down, and began to play a portion of Mozart's Requiem.

Lacrimosa. He thought of Salzburg. Of fleeting beauty. And of beauty that lived on. Of a brief span of glorious, productive living and of centuries of empty, predatory existence. Of old addictions. And new.

The last note sounded, ending his reverie. As the reverberation died, Nick rose, taking the bottle with him, and started upstairs. He could do little about his own addiction presently, but he could keep others from similar paths of destruction. It was a purpose -- it had been so long since he'd had even that much. Nick began to get ready for work -- purposefully.

* * * * *

Not too far away, in the penthouse of an historic building, the day's dying radiance limned the sleek black hair of a tall man with a youthful face and an incongruous wealth of sunsets remembered in his dark eyes.

"Hello? Earth to Mac. Anyone there?"

"Yes, Richie, what?" The tall man turned to look at the young man addressing him with some of that remembrance still in his eyes.

"Well -- at last," Richie Ryan said, shaking his head. "I must have called your name five times. How far away were you?"

Duncan MacLeod gazed at Richie thoughtfully a moment, then replied, absently. "Oh, about two hundred years."

Richie gazed at his boss in some amazement, then his open mouth pursed in a low whistle. "Yeah, well. I guess that explains it pretty well."

Duncan's stern features were suddenly transformed by the peculiar sweetness of his smile. "What was it you wanted, Richie?" Duncan inquired patiently, his deep voice still faintly haunted by the ghost of a Highland brogue.

"Well, I thought I'd make sure you didn't wanna just forget your stuffy old business meeting and come with us to the art museum," Richie answered.

"This 'stuffy old business meeting', as you called it, is one of the main reasons we're here in Toronto. Those Ojibwa artifacts--"

"I know, I know," Richie interrupted. "They're a major addition to the shop and you've got customers who'll drool over 'em -- if you decide to let'em out of your personal collection. I just thought I'd ask."

"Why are you trying so hard to get me to go?" Duncan wondered.

"I wanna go, you understand. It's just that, without you along, Tessa is gonna start educatin' me about all the stuff we see, usin' words like 'texture' and 'luminescence' and 'neo-classicism', when I could be hangin' back, scopin' out the babes. Just tell her to chill out on Richie's art class, ok?"

"Don't you think it would be good for you?"

"Well, yeah, sure, but you know I hear Tessa talkin' about this stuff everyday."

"I see." Duncan's features were serious but his eyes were alight with mischief. "Well. I'll do my best."

"Hey, thanks. Mac, I--"

"Richie? Duncan?" a soft, French-accented voice interrupted them. Tessa Noël came down the stairs, fitting an earring into place. "Richie, we need to be going. The exhibit opening is at six-thirty, then they also have the new wing of neo-classicists and abstract impressionists."

Richie rolled his eyes pleadingly at Duncan.

MacLeod caught Tessa around the waist and kissed her. "Have a wonderful time," he said.

"Oh, I think we will," she replied, eagerly. "There's so much to see. Will your meeting be long?"

"Probably -- so don't rush for my sake." Duncan glanced over at Richie's hopeful face. The highlander's eyes filled with mischievous laughter. "Or for Richie's, for that matter. I think he needs your undivided attention at the museum, Tessa. We've been neglecting his education."

"Mac!"

"Duncan, you are so right!" Tessa exclaimed. She kissed him quickly then turned to Richie. "And I had just planned to leave you on your own there, Richie. I'm sorry -- I wasn't thinking. We'll have a marvelous time sharing the experience."

"Mac -- no!"

Tessa grabbed Richie's arm and bundled him out, talking volubly about the aesthetic treats in store for him. Duncan caught one last look at the younger man's despairing face as Tessa pulled him out the door.

"Mac!"

The door cut off that anguished call and Duncan laughed, long and heartily, glad to have such bright sources for laughter again.

* * * * *

Somewhere a phone rang softly, insistently. A strong long-fingered hand reached out to still it. A heavy antique signet, chalcedony inlaid with jet in the shape of a bird in flames, glittered briefly in the light. Then it winked out as the receiver was raised into darkness.

"*Oui?* They're bringing him? Fifteen minutes -- *Très bien!* You are certain of the route... And it is--?" A pause. "Acknowledged. Well done. Any problems there? *Bien.* Carry on."

One long finger pressed the disconnect then a single button.

"Fifteen minutes. On the route we labelled C. Remember -- no witnesses. *Allez vite.*"

The hand replaced the receiver, pausing to caress it gently, the pale blue opalescent stone glowing with reflected fire, the bird black in its depths.

A soft chuckle sounded from the darkness.

* * * * *

Nick was just entering the station when Don Schanke, two other detectives and a horde of uniformed officers came pouring out.

"--And get Forensics on our tail, now!" Schanke was shouting over his shoulder. "Especially Natalie if she's not already gone!"

"Schanke -- what the hell--"

Nick's partner grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along, shouting over the din as they ran to Schanke's car.

"Hell is right, Nicky-boy. We've got major hell goin' down. Reports of automatic weapons fire at the intersection of First and Fremont -- officers down, civilians down--"

"Damn."

They dove into an unmarked car, Schanke keyed the ignition, slammed it in gear and peeled out of the police lot leading a caravan of flashing lights and wailing klaxons. Nick pulled out their light and shoved it onto the roof.

"There's more -- and probably no coincidence. That intersection is on the route Morrison was being brought in on."

"*Bordel d'merde!*," Nick breathed.

"What?" Schanke shouted over the scream of the sirens.

"I said -- 'holy shit'."

"Yeah. Get ready -- it's coming up."

They turned a corner into a scene from Dante's inferno, lit by the strobe fire of police flashers just on the scene. The usually deserted intersection was a pit of hell.

As they exited the car, Nick's immediate and almost overpowering sensation was the overwhelming smell of human blood. He fell back against the car, eyes shut tight, fists clenched. Desperately he fought the ravenous need touched off by the enormity of it, struggled against the sensations that awoke the beast within him. And won -- though the urge raged leashed within him.

Nick glanced at Schanke, but luckily, he, too, had been stunned speechless in shock at the scene before them.

A nondescript brown sedan had come to a stop half-on, half-off the sidewalk. It was riddled with bullets, broken glass littering the pavement around it. All four doors hung open drunkenly and three dead policemen sprawled in various macabre configurations in and around it, blood from innumerable wounds islanding the vehicle in a sea of red. Another sedan in similar condition crouched behind the first, with four dead officers around it.

As the two detectives approached the cars, Schanke suddenly asked, "Where the hell is Morrison?"

"Gone," Nick replied, frowning. "But why? If they just wanted to shut him up, they could have mowed him down with the others. And why take his body if they did?"

Schanke looked at Nick. "And, on top of that -- *how?* These men were good, experienced cops. They wouldn't have just stopped and let Morrison out."

The two were quiet a moment, studying the scene. Then Nick's head snapped up. "A ruse. Something they couldn't ignore -- like maybe another cop flagging them down."

He glanced at Schanke who nodded slowly. "Someone disguised as a cop, right? They stop... they're suddenly surrounded... The bad guys got Morrison... and then--"

"And then... seven dead cops," Nick grated.

"Jesus," Schanke whispered. "They didn't stop with the cops."

Nick glanced in the direction of Schanke's anguished gaze. Paramedics were scrambling in controlled chaos around several bodies on the sidewalk.

"They shot the bystanders, too," Nick voiced grimly.

Chaos increased as more personnel arrived, along with the ubiquitous crowd of onlookers, the grotesquely curious, drawn to this usually deserted area by the emanations of danger and death.

"Get this area cordoned off!" Nick shouted to several uniformed officers. "Warn those people away!"

Nick, Schanke and other detectives coming on scene began to control the confusion somewhat. Uniformed officers held back the crowd, checked the darkened buildings for witnesses and patrolled the perimeter. Forensics personnel combed the scene obtaining samples, bagging shell casings, and dusting for fingerprints.

Nick and Schanke met by the lead car to compare findings.

"Professional all the way," Schanke commented, his normal acerbic patter muted. "Automatic weapons, probably Uzis at close range. The most deserted intersection on the route and these businesses all closed for the night and the weekend."

"They got Morrison as clean as a whistle -- except, of course, for the minor detail of seven dead cops and two dead civilians," Nick added, bitterly.

Dr. Natalie Lambert, forensics expert and medical examiner, approached the two detectives. "We're doing all we can, but don't expect too much, guys," she stated tiredly. Her professional calm was solid, but her eyes were haunted. "I can tell you, this place is not going to give us much."

"Have your people go over everything twice," Nick replied tersely. "We're going to need anything you can give us. Especially any sign of Morrison. Time for the fine tooth comb, Nat."

Natalie sighed. Nick glanced at her quickly. His features softened. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

She smiled wryly. "I will be. I'm just hoping I can get this out of my mind at home. It's been a long time since anything on this job gave me nightmares."

Nick reached out and squeezed her shoulder gently. "All the more reason to do all we can to catch the bastards."

"Hear, hear," Schanke added. "And also because this is big. We're talkin' professional manpower, weaponry, and confidence."

"Confidence?" Natalie questioned.

"This perp -- or organization -- orders seven cops and assorted civilians offed. He obviously feels invulnerable -- well-hidden," Schanke replied, popping gum into his mouth.

Natalie nodded. "Well -- we'll do our best. Just get them, guys."

"Let us know if you dig anything up, Nat," Nick replied.

Natalie smiled, nodded and moved to join a group of lab techs. Nick caught Schanke's arm and pulled him away from the crowd. "We gotta talk, Schank," the blond detective stated.

"What gives, Knight?"

"This shouldn't have happened. It smells, Schanke -- it smells of rotten cop."

"No way, Nick! I can see how you'd think that, but it's not a possibility. There weren't more than three, four guys who even knew the whole plan for bringing Morrison in -- even you and I only knew parts of it--"

"Who knew?" Nick interrupted inexorably.

"Captain Stonetree, Captain Baker over at Old Town, The Crown Prosecutor -- Rouleau... maybe Commissioner Davenport... you see? No way, pal -- no dirt there, Nicky-boy."

"Then how do you explain this?" Nick demanded passionately, gesturing at the scene before them.

"Luck, process of elimination, Morrison's own slip-up, could be a million things, Nick, but not one of those guys gone dirty. They've been the good guys too long," Schanke answered, equally vehement. "It's just not possible."

Nick paused, frowning in concentration. "Perhaps you're right. They all have great reps."

"That's an understatement, too," Schanke said. "Listen, Nick -- we may be dealing with some kind of criminal genius with all kinds of sources. These shooters were wise guys. Big business."

Nick looked at Schanke seriously. "Whatever the possibilities, we need to play this one close to the chest, and cover each other. This is big, partner."

"You got that right, pal. No arguments here."

"Just in case, keep my suspicions in the back of your head, Skank. Then keep your head down. I've just gotten used to you," Nick said, quietly, his dark blue eyes intent on Schanke's brown ones. "It would be hard for me to go back to working alone."

"Yeah... sure, Nick," Schanke replied, equally softly. "Same here, pal." He cleared his throat and carefully assumed his customary smirk. "Hey, you watch yourself, too, Nicky. Just because you've been the

Boy Wonder so far doesn't mean you're invulnerable." He punched Nick in the shoulder. "What if this criminal genius finds out how you feel about garlic?" He went off, chuckling.

Nick rubbed his shoulder and shook his head, looking after his partner. "Yeah, that could be a killer."

* * * * *

The bells of St. Michael's Cathedral distantly sounded the hour of nine o'clock as footsteps echoed down a deserted street in the warehouse district. Soon voices could be heard over them.

"If only you hadn't wanted to take the stupid rental, all this wouldn't have happened, Tessa."

"Well, if you had just glanced at the gas gauge while you were driving, Richie, it would have been fine!"

"Don't forget the police cordon! If we hadn't been forced to detour, we wouldn't have gotten lost and we'd have had plenty of gas." He paused and they exchanged rueful grins. "I guess it's just Murphy's law in action. I wonder what that detour was all about?"

"I don't know, but it must have been very big," Tessa replied. "I don't think I've ever heard so many sirens."

"Yeah -- I'm just glad it didn't have anything to do with us," Richie said, thankfully.

"We're not always in the thick of things, Richie," Tessa laughed, then caught his arm. "Look, Richie -- a light! Over there, from that warehouse," Tessa pointed. "They probably have a phone -- we can call the rental agency and Duncan..." She started across the street in the direction of the light.

"Tessa, wait!" Richie caught her arm. "I don't know about this -- it could be--"

"Oh, Richie, it's just someone working late or doing inventory," Tessa pulled away and continued across the street. Richie ran after her. "You've been listening to too many of Duncan's stories."

"Or stuck in the middle of 'em," Richie muttered but ceased trying to stop her. "All right, just be quiet till we're sure it's okay."

They walked through the barely-opened door of the warehouse. The light was filtering through from the rear of immense space, behind rows of stacked crates. Tessa and Richie moved quietly around the rows and down an aisle between them.

Peering around the last row, they saw the lighted area and the tableau it illumined. A man with a bloody and swollen face lolled in a wooden chair, virtually held up by the ropes that imprisoned him. Three men stood around him, two beside him and one with his back to the two silent watchers. The latter man was speaking as Tessa and Richie looked on.

"*Tiens*, Alec, you are not telling us everything, *je pense*."

"Monseigneur, I have," the seated man sobbed. "I haven't said anything to the police! The two who questioned me the first time, they tried to make me talk, but I didn't tell them anything."

"And which two would that have been?" the tall man addressed as "Monseigneur" asked politely in a deep cultured tone.

"Jesus, I'm not sure." A gasp for breath, then shaking his head, "I can't remember, Monseigneur!"

The shadowed man insouciantly picked microscopic lint from the sleeve of his jacket. The movements of his fingers displayed the opalescence of his heavy signet ring. "Help Monsieur Morrison remember, Thomas," he requested gently.

The beefy blond to Morrison's right suddenly backhanded the bound man brutally across the face, brass knuckles flashing in the light. Blood and phlegm fountained into the air as the man's head reeled from the blow.

"All right!" Morrison screamed. "Please! Just a minute!" He panted painfully a moment, puffed, broken lips working. "One was an unusual name -- hadn't heard before... Scanlon... Scandy... No! It was Schanke -- Detective Schanke." The bound man's head fell against his chest.

"And the other?" the inquisitor prodded, studying his well-manicured nails.

Morrison's head slowly came up. "I remember. First name was Nick... Nick... Nick Knight, that was it. But sir, they didn't get anything from me. I guess they thought I'd panic if the uniforms kept after me."

"Really?" Faint interest was in the cultured tone.

"Yes... yes, Monseigneur!" Morrison gasped, eagerly, obviously feeling his employer's tone indicated understanding. "But that was all! They thought I'd crack at their show of force and tell them everything I know. But you were too quick for them! You got me out and now everything will be okay."

"On the contrary, dear boy, everything is not 'okay'. You are lying, Alec, *mon ami*, and that I cannot abide. I have good reason to believe you had already given the police certain information and were on your way into protective custody to, as you so put it, 'tell them everything you know'. Unwise, Alec, *mon vieux*, very unwise. I do not like lies, nor will I tolerate betrayal."

"No! No! Monseigneur -- I swear -- I swear -- I've always been loyal to you!" Morrison gabbled desperately.

"*Adieux, mon cher Alec*," the Monseigneur drawled nonchalantly. "I do so regret the necessity but, *du vrai*, it must be literally *adieux* -- to God -- with you. Roger, *s'il vous-plaît*."

He nodded to the other man standing beside Morrison. Unmoved by Morrison's pleading screams and struggles, Roger aimed a .22 caliber handgun almost point-blank at the man's head and fired. A neat hole appeared in Morrison's forehead. Simultaneously a gory mass exploded into the wall behind him as he collapsed.

Tessa shut her eyes and suppressed her scream with both hands struck quickly over her mouth. Richie was unable to remove his eyes from the scene, especially the blood and brain tissue that now spattered the wall behind the body.

The shadowed man shook his head. "A little messy, Roger," he said with clinical detachment.

"I'm sorry, Monseigneur," Roger replied. He shrugged. "It happens, even with .22's sometimes."

"Make sure the area is cleaned," Monseigneur drawled.

For Tessa and Richie, the shock faded at their simultaneous realization of the danger they were in. They looked at each other in the dimness, hardly daring to breathe, and motioned at the way out.

Suddenly, from down the aisle in which they stood, Tessa and Richie heard a shout, and knew a rearguard had spotted them. Everything suddenly seemed to Richie to happen in slow motion. The three men before them whirled and the tall, dark man was now clearly visible. In the close fluorescents, Tessa saw clearly the handsome features -- close cropped brown hair, deep-set blue eyes, high cheekbones, an aquiline nose well-cut mouth and square chin.

"Thomas! Roger!" the man spat, his insouciance gone.

Richie grabbed Tessa's arm as time abruptly returned to normal. They fled back the way they had come, the three armed strongmen in close pursuit. As they exploded from the warehouse, Tessa kicked off her heels and pounded behind Richie, adrenalin and terror lending wings to their feet.

Richie, veteran of quite a few street chases, was pursuing the darkest, most hidden route he could find in the twisting alleyways, but was desperate for a hopeful direction on this unfamiliar turf.

"Richie!" he heard Tessa pant behind him. "Back -- the way we came. Police cordon -- remember!"

Relief flooded him. "You got it, smart lady!"

A bullet whined past Richie's head as he grabbed Tessa's hand and ducked down the dark mouth of an alleyway that yawned suddenly to their left. They pounded through the small street, desperately conscious of the shouts of their pursuers calling to each other in the distance, dodging occasional obstacles with frantic haste.

They erupted onto a larger street. Richie glanced right and saw their rental parked in a pool of light cast by a street lamp. "This way!" he cried, and pulled Tessa that direction. She needed little urging, however, and ran beside him without demur, her long legs having no trouble keeping pace with him. They passed the car and fled on for two blocks as Richie frantically tried to reconstruct the route they had taken from the cordoned-off area.

Passing the another block, Richie suddenly recognized an unusual building. "Here!" he shouted, and turned onto the larger street, Tessa on his heels.

As they fled, Richie heard shouts less than two blocks down and another bullet ricocheted off a building as they passed it. As they pounded across another cross street Richie pulled Tessa into the darkness of a recessed doorway.

"Gotta rest a minute," he gulped out as she collapsed against the wall. Richie moved to the edge of doorway and peered down the street. In the dimness, he could see a car braking to a halt beside two gesturing men. After a moment's discussion, the men got in the car and it moved slowly towards them down the street. A hand-held light flashed from the passenger's window.

"Tessa -- we gotta run for it for sure now -- that third guy brought up their car."

"I'll try, Richie -- I don't know how much further I can go, though."

"Just remember what's on our tail, and that'll help. That police cordon is about five blocks away. Around this corner -- I think."

"Go!" she whispered, and they were off again. They edged around the corner in the shadows and dashed up the darkened street. The streets blurred around them. Richie glanced back and seeing no pursuit, gasped out, "Left!"

As they turned the corner, the lights from a slowly moving sedan pinned them in brightness.

"Run, Tessa!" Richie screamed, grabbing her and diving behind a dumpster.

The sedan braked and both front doors opened. Richie expected to hear gunfire, but instead heard something much more welcome.

"Stop! This is the police. Come out with your hands above your heads."

Richie peered around the edge of the dumpster for a moment.

"Do we believe them, Richie?" Tessa whispered, still gulping for air.

"Well, it's not the same car I saw those heavies get into. Let me try something."

He looked further around the edge of the dumpster. "Let's see a badge, officer," he shouted.

Richie saw a dark shape move behind the lights and heard a murmured, "Cover me." The shape moved from behind one opened door and into the backlight of the headlights and solidified into a man. As he moved into the light of the streetlamp, Richie saw a tall, blond man in a long, dark coat.

"I'm getting out my I.D.," the man said, moving slowly forward, suiting action to words. "Another officer is covering you."

"He's not one of those other guys we saw in the warehouse either, Tessa."

The man stepped a little closer. Richie said "Stop there and toss the badge."

The man complied and Richie caught the leather wallet. Opening it, he and Tessa saw the badge and the I.D.

"Look at his name, Richie," Tessa breathed, thankfully.

"Nicholas Knight... Hey, yeah, Nick Knight. Remember? Morrison mentioned him. He is a cop." Richie looked at Tessa inquiringly.

"We have to hope so," Tessa replied. "Those other guys are around here somewhere."

"Okay -- here goes." Richie turned back and called louder "All right, Detective. We're coming out. We're unarmed." Richie led the way, and he and Tessa came around the edge of the dumpster, their hands in the air.

The blond detective moved slowly towards them, watching them intently. Richie noticed Nick studying him carefully, then Tessa, his eyes narrowing at her obviously expensive clothes and her bare, stockings feet.

"I.D. please," Nick commanded. He studied the cards they gave him, then returned them. Knight called over his shoulder "Come on, Schanke, they're clean."

Knight's partner, a dark, heavy-set man, moved to Knight's back. He glanced up and down the street, his gun still aimed at Tessa and Richie.

"Okay, Ms. Noel, Mr. Ryan, what's your story? Why are you in this area, and why were you running?"

"Detective Knight -- we'll answer your questions, in detail, but right now we are being chased by some very dangerous men."

"Why?"

"Accidently we saw them execute someone -- Morrison... They called him Morrison." She glanced at Richie.

"Yeah, Alec Morrison," he supplied. "And he mentioned both your names."

"Damn," Schanke breathed. He shoved his gun into his holster. "Let's get them out of here, Nick."

"Get in the car," Nick snapped, and they all ran to the vehicle.

"Call it in, Skank!" Tessa heard Nick say as Detective Schanke jumped into the driver's seat. As Detective Schanke complied, Tessa watched Detective Knight as he stood by the open car door on the passenger side. He was scanning the dark, deserted street carefully, as if it were broad daylight or as if he could hear something they couldn't. "Heads up, Schanke!" he shouted, pulling his gun.

The other three looked around, wondering what he sensed. After a moment, though, three blocks behind them, a car with no lights on turned slowly into the street.

"Get them away, Schanke!" Nick ordered, starting to close the door.

Schanke leaned over and blocked it. "Damn it, Knight, this is no time to play Lone Ranger!" he shouted. "If those are the wise guys that stole Morrison, you can't go after 'em alone! God knows what armament they're packing. And we've got civilians here, Nick. We need to get them out and call for back-up!"

Knight stood looking back at the slowly moving car a split second longer. Tessa saw frustration cross his well-cut, handsome features. Then, he leapt in the car and slammed the door. "Go!" he snarled.

Suddenly, behind them lights flashed on and an engine roared. Schanke slammed the unmarked car into gear and peeled out with tires screaming.

"Get down!" Nick threw over his shoulder at Tessa and Richie who immediately obeyed.

Schanke sped down the darkened streets, taking abrupt turns, always angling towards the precinct station. Nick jammed the emergency flasher onto the roof and called in their movements on the radio.

"Hell, they're stuck like glue, Nick!" Schanke shouted as the following car caromed around a corner behind them.

Suddenly, there was a screaming whine as a bullet ricocheted off the back of the car's roof. Nick whirled around, took aim out of the side window and the 9mm Beretta roared out several shots. He jerked back inside. The car behind them swerved a little but continued to close. Nick leaned out and fired again, with the same result.

Nick pulled back in. With a practiced flip of his wrist he ejected the spent clip. He grabbed a full one from his coat pocket and slammed it into the gun.

"Where the hell is our back-up?" he demanded.

The back window exploded thunderously as automatic weapons fire erupted behind them. One of the back tires blew. Schanke fought the wheel but the car was almost unmanageable. It skidded onto the curb and side-swiped a newspaper stand. Somehow Schanke managed to wrest it back onto the street, despite the jolting of driving on the rim.

And then the other tire blew.

The car skidded to the left losing some speed before it impacted with a streetlamp. With wordless teamwork, Schanke and Nick threw themselves out their respective doors. Once out, Schanke started firing as Nick leapt up and rolled across the hood onto Schanke's side, both sheltering behind the car.

Nick shouted at Tessa and Richie, "Stay down!"

Richie shouted back, "Hell, yes, we'll stay down!" He glanced at Tessa, "You all right?"

"Ask me when we get out of this."

"Don't you mean *if* we get out of this?"

Tessa's nervous laugh was cut off by the roar of the oncoming car. All at once the sounds of sirens could be heard from all around them. From opposite directions, police cars sped towards them. With a final burst of automatic fire, the chase car screamed past them and disappeared around the next corner with three units speeding after it.

Nick and Schanke exchanged a rueful look, as they caught their breaths on sighs of relief. They holstered their weapons and Schanke opened the rear door. "Everybody all right?" he asked, looking Tessa and Richie over carefully as they climbed out shakily.

Tessa nodded. Richie replied, "Yeah, sure, piece of cake."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Then I think we better have the whole story." He almost had to shout as two units with sirens blaring approached them.

"Could we tell you on the way to the scene?" Richie replied. "If Detective Schanke can get us back to where you found us, I think I can trace our way back to that warehouse. And that might help as much as we can."

"Let's do it," Nick agreed and they started towards one of the police cars.

* * * * *

Duncan sat down with a cup of tea beside the large window overlooking Lake Ontario. As he studied the lights on the water, he sipped his tea and mused over the quality of the Native American artifacts

he had purchased just hours before. They were all authentic, in excellent condition and quite valuable to his collection. Some would be especially meaningful, since he remembered the individual who had worn them, two hundred and fifty years ago. The Scotsman smiled, thinking of Richie's earlier comments on the subject. He glanced at his watch, wondering idly how much longer it would take for Richie to drag Tessa away from the museum.

The phone's abrupt clamor sliced into his quite reverie. He snagged the portable unit and telescoped the antenna. "Hello?"

"Duncan?" it was Tessa, breathless.

Duncan sat up quickly, his cup and saucer rattling down onto the side table. "Tessa -- what's happened?"

"Duncan, it's all right -- We're all right. We're at the police station."

"What the hell--"

"Don't worry, please! Everything is fine now. I can't tell you all of it on the phone. I just didn't want you to be upset when we were late."

"Where are you? I'll be there as--"

"No!" Tessa gasped, then lowered her voice. "There is no reason for you to get involved with this, Duncan. There might be too many questions."

"Damn it, Tessa--" Duncan exploded.

"No, I mean it. Richie and I are both fine. We'll handle this and be home as soon as possible." She paused. Then, more quietly, "I love you, Duncan. Stay there. We'll be there soon."

"Tessa!" Duncan cried, but the receiver clicked and went dead. Macleod slammed the antenna down. He tossed the phone onto the table and began to pace.

* * * * *

Duncan was still pacing an hour later when he heard a car pull up outside. Glancing out he saw a police car and a uniformed officer exiting it. The officer opened the rear door and Tessa and Richie got out.

Duncan saw no more, for he was running for the stairs. He pounded downstairs, keyed the security system, and threw open the double wooden doors. He met Tessa and Richie on the front steps. He folded Tessa in his arms and held her for a moment. Then he reached out, snagged Richie's shoulder and shook him gently. Drawing back he studied them both. "I can see it was *not* a typical night at the art museum," he said quietly, "so I'm not going to yell at you much. But if you ever call me and leave me hanging like that again, I'll be *really* angry."

"Jeeze, I hope we'll never have that reason to call again, Mac," Richie replied.

"Well, come on up and you can tell me about it," Duncan said as Tessa just smiled tiredly. Looking down, Duncan continued, exclaiming, "Tessa -- what the hell happened to your feet?"

"It's a very long story, Duncan," she replied, sighing.

"Come on, then," he replied, swinging her up into his arms. "We'll get you both more comfortable, then we'll talk."

"I'll tell you this right now, Mac," Richie stated firmly as he held the door for Macleod to carry Tessa through. "Next time she wants to go to an art museum in a strange city, **you're** going with her."

As the door closed behind them, a dark shape flitted out of the black mouth of a nearby doorway. Keeping to the shadows, the eavesdropper rounded the corner and quietly entered a car parked there. The car started and, with the headlights still off, slowly pulled away.

* * * * *

"And then what happened?" Duncan Macleod asked. He completed the taping of a bandage over a gash on the side of Tessa's foot and looked up inquiringly.

Tessa raised haunted eyes over the rim of her brandy glass. "Well, we found the warehouse again after retracing our steps."

"Yeah," Richie added, shouldering into an old robe over his T-shirt and sweatpants. "And it looked like somebody had cleaned up. They knew they had to do it fast, and they did a pretty thorough job."

"Could the police find anything?" Duncan asked, as he gently cleaned a cut on Tessa's other foot with a peroxide swab.

"They found enough to verify our story," Richie continued. He flopped into a nearby chair and with an impatient hand pushed back his dark-blond curls, still damp from the shower. "We found the place where they had held Morrison. The body, the chair and everything was gone and a lot of the crates had been rearranged real quick." He paused to grab a beer from side table and take a quick sip. "But Knight and Schanke pushed some of the crates aside and you could just see where the blood had spattered on the wall. They got their lab people in and, sure enough, they found enough stuff for their tests."

Duncan finished cleaning Tessa's cuts and bandaged the foot deftly. He then patted Tessa's foot, placed it gently back onto the ottoman, and began to repack the well-stocked first aid kit. "What do the police want you to do?" he asked.

"They said if we could remain here in Toronto presently it would be helpful," Tessa replied shakily after a sip of brandy. "If they locate the body, they will need us to identify it... if possible." She paused, taking a deep breath. "Of course, we will also need to identify the killers if they are ever found."

Duncan said, "Staying shouldn't be a problem. I have several more days of work to do here. Now... tell me again about the leader of Morrison's killers."

"He was tall -- taller than you, Mac. Well over six feet," Richie mused. "He could have been thirty-five to forty-five -- it was hard to tell, but his hair was brown. No gray in it yet."

"I would describe him as handsome," Tessa added reflectively. "He had wonderful bone structure." Duncan smiled at the way her artistic eye operated even under such stress. "He had high cheekbones, an aquiline nose and deep set eyes." Her fingers tightened around the glass as she continued, "But what struck me most was the look in those eyes. So beautiful -- a light sky blue -- but so very cold. A shark's eyes."

Duncan's eyes narrowed. He placed the first aid kit on the coffee table, took up his brandy snifter and sat down beside Tessa, pulling her close. After a moment, he asked, "Do you remember anything else striking about him?"

Tessa sat up a little and leaned toward the younger man. "The ring, Richie -- do you remember?"

"Oh, yeah that's right!"

"He wore a heavy antique signet ring on his right hand," Tessa stated. "Silver with a pale stone."

MacLeod glanced up at Tessa quickly. "Can you remember anything else about it?"

She thought a moment, then shook her head. "No -- it was all too fast and we were too far away. Duncan, do you think you know him?"

MacLeod shrugged and shook his head. "Even in four hundred years you don't know everyone," he said, lightly. "The ring just makes me think of someone I knew. But your description could fit many people."

"This man you knew -- was he an Immortal?" Tessa asked, worriedly.

Duncan nodded, his eyes unfocused and far away. "Lucian LeNoir."

"Did you kill him?"

"No... but I would have liked to. He was -- a very unpleasant person."

"What happened to him? Is he still alive?" Tessa asked.

"No -- I heard from reliable sources that he had been executed during the Terror."

Richie's eyebrows climbed. "The Terror? What was that?"

"The French Revolution," Duncan answered, looking at a Richie. "*Madame La Guillotine* could destroy an Immortal just as well as a sword."

Richie shook his head and drank more beer. "I'm glad it wasn't him, then," the young man stated. "That guy was bad enough without being an Immortal on top of it all."

"Very true," Duncan answered. But even as he said it, the highlander frowned into the golden depths of the vintage Armagac. "It would certainly complicate this entire matter."

* * * * *

Later that night a ringing telephone briefly disturbed candlelit stillness, but it was quickly answered. "Yes?" the deep, cultured tone spoke.

"Sir, the subjects of your interest are staying in a restored brownstone -- 2846 Lakeshore Boulevard," the voice in the receiver stated quietly. "Their names are Tessa Noel and Richie Ryan. They are visiting

Toronto, lately from Paris, on business. The woman is an artist -- a sculptor of some note -- here as a consultant on a new exhibit for the Royal Museum."

"Well done. Anything more?"

"Yes. I ran a routine check on their address. Ms. Noel told the officers it was a friend's apartment. The building is owned by a holding company called Glenfinnan Enterprises."

There was a pause. After a moment the deep voice answered slowly, "Go on -- your discoveries interest me greatly"

"As they were going into the building, a man ran out to meet them. Tall, well-built, with long, dark hair pulled back with a clip. The woman called him 'Duncan'. They appeared intimate. Ryan called him 'Mac'. They seemed to be close friends. Interesting that neither of them mentioned him to the police."

"Believe me, *mon ami*, it is *très intéressant*. Is there more?"

"No more about the witnesses at present. However, you also asked about the detectives in charge of this case. They are Don Schanke and Nick Knight. Partners -- both good cops, excellent records. Schanke is a family man -- wife, one daughter. Obnoxious, but a good, intuitive investigator. The most dangerous of the two, though, is Knight. A bachelor... no family. A loner... a bit of a loose cannon, and an amazing arrest record."

"Any friends?"

"Very few. He mainly associates with his partner and with a medical examiner he works with -- a Dr. Natalie Lambert."

"Ah, a woman. A lover?"

"Not known, for certain, sir, but a close relationship."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir, not at this time."

"Excellent; keep me posted."

The receiver was replaced and the man who had done so sat thoughtfully watching the candlelight scintillate in his jewelled ring.

After several moments, another voice spoke. "Do you want us to hit them now, Monseigneur?"

"No," the cultured voice replied, slowly. "Not quite yet. They may be quite useful alive. There is time, Thomas. But now I have another task for you and Roger. Take Morrison's body and place it so that it will appear to have been hidden -- or rather that someone tried to hide it. But I want it found tomorrow."

"Yes, Monseigneur." The two men hurried out.

The candlelit quiet returned briefly only to be broken by the rich voice speaking softly.

"Duncan, eh? *Oui, c'est très intéressant!*"

* * * * *

Nicholas Knight entered his converted warehouse loft as dawn sent exploring fingers through the tall windows. He carefully skirted the edge of the sunlit squares and scooped up his remote. Aiming it over his shoulder, Nick flicked a control and the dark shades descended, severing the tendrils of light. Tossing the remote onto the dining table, he passed on to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle at random.

Nick had just poured some of the dark, rich-looking liquid into a goblet when the phone rang and his answering machine kicked in.

"This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado, so if you want to leave your name and number, go ahead."

"Nick, it's Nat. If you're not asleep yet, I've got some test results from those warehouse specimens--"

Nick was across the room in a blur of motion. He caught up the receiver. "Nat, I'm here. Shoot."

"You want the good news or the bad news first?" she quipped.

Nick sipped his drink. "You mean there actually is some good news?" he asked, wryly.

"Well, it's not much, but it does seem your witnesses are reliable. The evidence -- at least, what there is of it -- fits their story. The location of the bloodstains, the angle of the shot, the specimens we located and the bullet we dug out of the wall -- it all fits."

"That's something, I guess," Nick stated. "And the bad news?"

"Well, it could be bad. The blood sample from the scene matches the blood type on file from Morrison's previous incarceration."

Nick sighed. "I had a feeling it would be."

A brief pause, then Natalie spoke quietly, "You seem to feel it a bit more with this one."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Nick answered. "Morrison wasn't typical of most state's evidence witnesses. He seemed to feel real compunction for all he'd done. His guilt had begun to haunt him and he had to do something about it."

Natalie's voice was gentle. "I see. It sounds familiar."

"I could identify with him. He wanted to come in out of the cold, just like I do," Nick said, wistfully. "I feel like I failed him."

"What else could you've done?" Natalie demanded. "You and Schanke tried to get him to come in at your first meeting. You told him the risks -- pretty forcefully, from the way you described it. But he refused -- and you had no way to force him then. You did your best, Nick. You can't feel guilty about that."

Nick smiled at the vehemence in her tone. "It's hard not to, but, thanks, Nat. Anything else from the tests?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. The slug we found in the cars where Morrison was taken matched those retrieved from Schanke's car after the chase last night."

"Icing on the cake."

"Yep. Sounds like the witnesses are solid."

"I think so. I started routine background checks, but they seem to be okay."

"Good. Maybe they'll be the key to open up your case."

"Well, there's always hope. Thanks for the information."

"No problem -- I'll just put it on your bill," Natalie answered playfully.

"You do that," Nick replied. Then, softer, "And, Nat..."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks again for the encouragement."

Her voice smiled. "Anytime. Bye!"

"Cheers, Nat."

Nick pressed a button, heard a dial-tone then called another number. After a moment, it was answered.

"Detective Schanke here."

"Schanke--"

"Knight, aren't you asleep yet? Even you've got to be beat after the night we had."

"I'm on my way -- just tying up loose ends. Have you talked to Natalie yet? The lab results?"

"She faxed 'em to me. Looks like our witnesses are dead on." Schanke chuckled. "No pun intended."

"I hope not," Nick groaned. "Listen. Schank, last night after you left I asked Norma to start routine backgrounds on Noël and Ryan. Anything come in on that?"

"Yeah, yeah, got it right here," Schanke replied, through a mouthful of doughnut, Nick decided to himself.

"They check out, Nick," Schanke said momentarily, more distinctly. "The kid's got a juve record, but nothing serious. He seems to've been a model citizen lately. Ms. Noël is a well-received sculptor and the curator of the AGO corroborated her story. They were there last night to attend an art show and she's doing consulting work there."

"Good. I also asked her to check out the ownership of the building they were staying in. Anything on it?"

"Yeah, but why'd you do that?"

"No big reason," Nick mused. "Just because it wasn't a hotel, I guess. What've you got?"

"Well, nothing on the friend they said let 'em use the apartment, but that doesn't mean much. He must own the company it's registered to," Schanke said.

"What company?"

"Let's see... oh, here it is. Glenfinnan Enterprises."

"Glenfinnan..." Nick repeated quietly.

After a moment, Schanke broke the silence abruptly. "Hello? Knight -- did you fall asleep? Wake up and hit the hay, pal."

"Sorry, Schanke, I must have dozed off. What?"

"Go to bed!" Schanke said emphatically.

Nick laughed. "Gladly. Later, Schanke."

"Hasta la bye-bye."

As Nick put down the phone his smile slowly faded and his eyes took on a deep, pensive, inward gaze. He sank into the welcome embrace of the couch, drank his meal, and remembered Glenfinnan...

* * * * *

Glenfinnan. Stark. Beautiful. At least, usually. But that night it was different. Battle and slaughter had raged there during the day and had left the wide highland valley awash with blood. Even the profound sapphire of Loch Shiel seemed tinged with crimson. Nicholas stood on a small rise overlooking the battlefield and drank in the sensations. In the dim moonlight the bodies scattered over the broken plain were clearly visible to him.

It had been one more battle in the Revolution that had rocked England and Scotland throughout this year of 1650, King Charles was a year dead and the Cavalier opposition crushed. Cromwell had thus been able to turn his attention to Scotland and the many Scots, both Lowlanders and Highlanders, still loyal to the Stewart line.

And thus again tonight, so many bodies, both Scottish King's men and English Roundheads together in the equalizing embrace of death. Further examples of mortals' brutality to their brothers. At least my inhumanity will still the moans of those dying in slow agony, Nicholas thought. While the remnants of his humanity mourned, his bestial self gloated -- for in their deaths was his life.

The rising wind flung the scent of blood into Nicholas' face. His well cut nostrils flared. Suddenly, his white teeth bared in an animal snarl that displayed long fangs. He leaped into the air, a creature of darkness, covered by darkness. He flew down to the field, his black woolen cloak billowing behind him.

Nicholas landed near one of the bodies. As he drew near, he saw it was a young man, little more than a boy. Blood-tinged fluid still seeped from a gut wound below his breastplate -- a wound from which his entrails protruded. Nicholas could hear him moan weakly.

The vampire dropped to his knees beside the young Englishman. The young soldier felt the presence of another and opened crusted eyes. "Water," he whispered from between cracked lips.

"I have no water to give you," Nicholas said, "but I can give you release."

"Do it, then," the boy begged. "Please!"

With a growl, Nicholas plunged his fangs into both the large vein and the large artery of the boy's neck and he began to feed.

With the intensity of his bloodlust and the moans from his victim, Nicholas did not hear the footsteps behind him until it was too late. He was swinging around, blood dripping from his fangs, when a sword bit into his side. "Demon!" screamed a Roundhead soldier.

With a feral roar, Nicholas leapt to his feet. He jerked the blade from his side easily, contemptuously, despite the gush of bright blood that followed it. The soldier, stunned by the terrible reality of his target, held on to the hilt in a rictus of fear. Nicholas pulled the sword left-handed with superhuman power, wrenching the man towards him. The vampire's right hand thrust up and out lightning-quick. He struck the soldier's face brutally, driving the broken nasal ridge into his brain.

Before the body could fall, Nicholas swung around, holding it before him as a shield. The oncoming sword of a new attacker bit into the neck of the corpse and wedged into the chest.

Still-warm blood fountained outward, steaming. Nicholas caught a mouthful as he let the corpse drop. He watched as mindless terror blossomed on the face of his new attacker. Before the man could attack again, Nicholas' right foot blurred upward and smashed into his chest. His armor breastplate crumpled like paper and his sternum was crushed inward to pierce his heart and lungs as he soared backwards, dying.

Immediately, three more soldiers were upon Nicholas.

"Demon!"

"Defiler of the dead!"

The first lunged with his pike. Nicholas' right hand chopped downward fiercely and the haft snapped. The man's motion carried him on forward, and Nicholas struck him to the ground with an elbow to the base of the skull.

Abruptly, another pike sliced into Nicholas' thigh. Nicholas screamed with rage and turned on the new attacker. The soldier ripped the blade from Nicholas' leg and leaped backwards, out of reach.

A flicker of the soldier's eyes caused Nicholas to pivot suddenly and throw his arm up defensively. Just then, the third attacker's pike cut deeply into his shoulder -- rather than into his neck.

Nicholas grabbed the haft with his left hand, jerked it out of the wound and out of his attacker's hands. He swept the haft around and struck its owner a ringing blow to his helmet, knocking the man to his knees.

Suddenly, Nicholas heard the thunder of hoofbeats and glimpsed two horsemen galloping down on him. He turned and ran, fighting the weakness that threatened to come over him. Though he felt little pain, his strength was ebbing.

Nicholas started to leap into the air when a soldier appeared from behind a rock outcrop and struck him across the stomach as he rose. He fell to earth like a stone, gasping for breath. He knew he must have been hit with the unbladed side of the pike, or he would have been cut in half.

The soldier dropped his pike, pulled his sword, and sprang forward. Nicholas glimpsed his face, recognizing him as the second attacker that had escaped him moments earlier. As the man thrust downwards to impale him, Nicholas rolled swiftly to one side. The sword's point plunged deeply into the peaty earth. In a blur of super-human speed, Nicholas leapt up, grabbed the man and tossed him into the air. The hapless soldier crashed into the legs of the oncoming horse. The screaming horse plummeted to earth with its rider, rolling and crushing both bodies beneath it.

Nicholas began to run again but the second horseman was upon him. Nick ducked the quick sweep of the horseman's sword that was meant for his head. He could feel himself slowing, weakening, so he was not quick enough when the rider wheeled his horse on its hind legs and swung his sword. The weighted sword hilt struck Nicholas a blow in the head that would have killed a mortal. He fell to the ground on hands and knees, fighting to stay conscious. While the rider controlled his protesting horse to swing around on him, Nicholas pushed himself groggily to his feet and staggered on.

He was now too weak and disoriented to launch himself into the air. He lurched forward in desperation, looking for some form of cover, hanging on to consciousness grimly. He knew the golden glow of his eyes had faded back to mortal blue and his fangs had disappeared.

Shouts echoed behind him. "We have him now, men!"

A solitary menhir loomed ahead, silvery gray in the moonlight. Nick lunged around it as hoofbeats pounded behind him. A sword seared the air where his head had just been and struck the standing stone with a screaming shower of sparks.

"Here he is, lads!" shouted the horseman. "He does not deserve a clean death, so thou mayest take thy sport!"

Three more foot soldiers came running up. One held a pike, the other two carried swords. Nick faced them grimly, his back against the stone. His strength and senses were weaker than mortal now. He managed to evade the initial thrusts of both foot soldiers and horseman, using the bulk of the lichenous stone to best advantage.

All at once, the pikeman made a quick thrust with the point of his weapon that pierced Nicholas' right shoulder to his lung before he could jerk himself backwards. With a strangled cry, Nicholas fell to the ground, weakness swallowing him. The soldiers closed in on him warily. Nicholas pushed himself to his hands and knees, but hopelessness struck him.

I am dead, he thought desperately struggling to stay upright as one soldier kicked him in the stomach. I cannot last against them. I am dead.

Another kick struck the wound on his side and Nicholas fell against the stone as blood drenched him. He saw the pikeman swing his weapon back for a decapitating blow.

Suddenly, a fierce Gaelic war cry pierced the silver dimness and a wild horseman galloped down on them, straight at the pikeman. Groggily, Nicholas caught a quick glimpse of streaming black hair and a billowing tartan plaid. The newcomer rode down the pikeman and with a sudden flash of a long sword dispatched the other foot-soldiers.

"Highland scum! King's minion!" the Roundhead horseman cried and spurred his horse towards the Scotsman.

Nicholas saw that the Scotsman wore neither helmet nor breastplate. But he soon proved to need it not, for his glittering sword was all the armor he required.

Nicholas could see the fight only through a haze of weakness, but it was enough to reveal the newcomer as a master swordsman. Moments later, there was an intricate thrust of the bright blade. The soldier fell to the ground, dead. His horse bolted into the night.

The Scotsman slid off his horse with feline grace and flung the reins over a nearby gorse bush. With a swirl of a dark plaid over bare knees, he strode to Nicholas' side and knelt.

Nicholas squinted up into dark, guarded eyes in a strong, youthful face. "From what hell did thee ride, Donald?" he whispered, as the Scotsman began to examine his wounds.

There was a brief, amused twitch of his well-cut mouth. "Wherever I hie from, 'tis a guid thing for ye, English," the Scot replied. He sat up, impatiently tossing back his long black hair. He opened his sporran, the small badger skin satchel worn over the kilt, and removed a small length of linen. He ripped it into several pieces and bound one deftly around Nicholas' thigh. He glanced up at Nicholas, the braids on either side of his face swinging. "And it's no' Donald, John Barleycorn," he said, mockingly. "I'm Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod."

"It is obviously my good fortune to meet thee, Duncan MacLeod," Nicholas said, hoarsely. "I am called Nicholas de Brabrant, at thy service - or rather, at thy mercy. But... why?"

MacLeod did not answer for a moment. He was busy folding the other pieces of linen into pads. One he slid in gently beneath Nicholas' shirt to cover the shoulder wound. The other he placed over the wound in Nicholas' side, buttoning his doublet to hold in place. Then the Scotsman sat back on his haunches, wiping the blood from his hands with a handful of wet heather. He adjusted his large tartan across his chest and shoulders, then looked at Nicholas.

"Why' what, Nicholas de Brabrant?" he asked.

"Why did you save me?"

MacLeod shrugged. "I didna' like the odds. I hae been chased by a mob my own self," he answered.

Then his dark eyes seemed to study Nicholas with penetrating intensity. His deep voice was thoughtful as he continued. "And also... because I ha' the feeling that thou an' I may be like in other ways."

Nicholas laughed weakly. "Thou sayest it much too soon, friend."

"We shall see," the Highlander replied. "I must get ye awa' from this cold clach and onto my horse. Be ready."

There was a gentle pull and then all Nicholas knew was blackness...

* * * * *

...Nick Knight gazed at the depths of the empty bottle.

"Glenfinnan," he whispered. After a moment, he sat the bottle down on the coffee table and climbed the stairs to bed.

* * * * *

Later that Saturday afternoon, a young uniformed policeman spoke into his radio. "Patch me through to Detective Schanke," he requested, watching the ME's van pull up to the yellow tape that cordoned off the alley.

After a moment there was a click and a voice on the radio. "Schanke here."

"Detective, this is Deidrick. We're on patrol in East York -- off Bayview and O'Connor, near the river. I think we may have found that body you guys were looking for."

"Roger that. Good work. What's the 10-20 on the stiff?"

"The ME's van is here now. They should be loading him out to the morgue in about an hour or so."

"Great. Thanks for the call." Don Schanke hung up the phone. "All right!" he exclaimed to the squad room in general. "Now we might get somewhere. Hey, Larson!" he called another detective. "Where's Stonetree?"

"On his way up from Holding," the man replied.

"Good, thanks," Schanke answered. He caught up the phone and punched in a number. "Maybe our luck's changing."

* * * * *

Across town, a few minutes later, Tessa Noël hung up the phone. "That was Detective Schanke," she said.

Duncan looked up from across the room where he was carefully wrapping a ceremonial mask. He placed it gently in a box nearly full of similarly wrapped objects. "I thought as much," he replied. "What did he say?"

"He wants to pick us up in half an hour to go to the morgue," she answered quietly. "They think they've found Morrison's body."

"All right," Macleod replied, placing the box carefully beside two others. He turned. "Let's--"

"No, Duncan," Tessa said, firmly, walking towards him. "There is no 'let's'. Richie and I will go and we'll be fine. You've got to stay here."

"Tessa, I don't like it at all," Duncan said, stubbornly, folding his arms.

"We've been through this already," she said. "There would be too many questions -- especially now that both Richie and I said nothing about you last night. They will take care of us, Duncan." Tessa came close and studied his face but saw no signs of relenting. She placed a coaxing hand on his crossed arms. "After all, we've seen the policemen parked in the car outside. I think that shows they're serious about taking care of us."

Duncan stood still a moment longer. Finally his arms relented to the entreaty of her hand and face. He uncrossed his arms and caught her to him. "All right -- if you're certain," Duncan sighed, kissing her quickly. "I imagine the police are going to take good care of their star witnesses."

"Exactly," Tessa replied, smiling. "Don't worry."

MacLeod pulled her close again but he frowned into her hair.

* * * * *

Elsewhere in the city, a cellular phone rang. The driver of the van picked it up. "Yes, Monseigneur?"

"Thomas, are you and Roger and your men in place?"

"Yes, sir, we are ready."

"*Bien sûr*, they are on their way there. Remember -- I want all four alive and reasonably undamaged."

"As you wish, Monseigneur," Thomas answered. "But I still don't see why we need all of them."

"Do not worry, Thomas. I have my reasons. Bring them."

"Yes, Monseigneur."

The line went dead with finality.

* * * * *

Duncan stood at the apartment window gazing out, frowning, as he had for the last fifteen minutes. He had watched while Tessa and Richie had driven off with Detective Schanke. He had seen the police car with their faithful observers pull off after them.

Abruptly, Duncan whirled and strode to a nearby table. He picked up a telephone directory and thumbed through it. Finding the number he desired, he tossed the directory aside, scooped up the phone, and pressed the buttons. "Yes, officer. I have some information on a case for a Detective Don Schanke. He gave me his card, but I'm afraid I can't find it," Duncan said, charmingly contrite. "Could you tell me where I could locate him?"

Silence, while Duncan listened intently to the voice on the line.

"The twenty-seventh precinct?" the highlander repeated. "Thank you very much, sir. Good-by."

Duncan dropped the receiver into its slot and caught up his long coat. He eyed his sword regretfully as it lay sheathed on a high shelf, but shook his head.

Turning, MacLeod shrugged into his long coat and was down the stairs and out the door.

* * * * *

Sunset colors still painted the sky as Nick entered the twenty-seventh precinct. "Barney!" he called to the desk sergeant. "Is Stonetree still here?"

"Yeah, Nick. Matter of fact -- he wanted to see you as soon as you came in. He's expecting a few of the top brass involved in that witness abduction case. He wanted both you and Schanke in on it, but Schanke's got your other witnesses at the morgue."

"Okay, thanks, Barney." Nick strode past the desk through the usual chaos but was blind to it. He passed quickly into the detective's squad room. He glanced at Schanke's desk but seeing it empty, and nothing new on his own desk, moved on.

At the Captain's door, he knocked quickly.

"Come," Stonetree responded from within.

Nick opened the door and entered. "Evening, Captain."

"Lo, Nick. Have a seat. We've got some good news," Stonetree nodded.

"That's good. What?" Nick asked as he closed the door and sat.

"We found Morrison's body today," the captain answered, leaning back in his chair. "At least, we think it is. Schanke's gone to take a look and has your two witnesses with him."

"Yeah, so Barney said."

"If it was Morrison they saw killed, we'll have some kind of direction for this investigation."

"Well, that's something anyway," Nick replied. "I'll go join them at the morgue."

"Sure, but before you go, I want you in on a meeting about the case. I'm expecting the Crown Prosecutor, Captain Baker, and Commissioner Davenport any minute now. We'll need your input on the progress of the investigation."

"Strategy meeting, Captain?" Nick asked.

"Yeah, we'll try not to keep you too long."

"No problem -- I wanted to discuss something with you anyway."

Stonetree looked up intently at the note of gravity in Nick's voice. "Go on, Nick."

"There's something about this case that just doesn't feel right to me."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but something about Morrison's capture. It just seems there must have been more to it than just luck on the part of the perps. They got in and out too fast, at just the right location. It reads to me like they had inside information."

"Shit -- how can that be? The only people who knew the route were-- "

A knock sounded at the door. Nick and Stonetree looked up impatiently.

"Come!"

Two men entered. One smiled apologetically when he saw them. "Sorry, Joe -- are we interrupting?"

Stonetree stood, smiling. "Mark, Commissioner, come on in," he invited, moving around the desk to shake the newcomers' hands. "Nick, you remember Commissioner Davenport, but I don't think you've met Captain Mark Baker from Old Town." Stonetree turned to Baker. "Mark, this is one of the men I was telling you about -- Detective Nick Knight. One of my best."

Nick stood and shook hands with the men. Davenport was a tall, burly man with a firm handshake and a politician's *bonhomie*. Baker was shorter, just average height with a pleasant smile, but hawk-like eyes and an obvious intensity. His crisp expensive suit contrasted with Stonetree's rumpled attire.

"Glad to see you again, Commissioner," Nick responded. "And I'm pleased to meet you, Captain Baker. Your reputation has certainly proceeded you."

Baker smiled and nodded. "I can certainly say the same about you, Detective Knight."

"I understand you're in on this Morrison case, Nick," Davenport said.

"Yes, sir, I am."

Stonetree stated, "I thought we needed to all meet with the investigation officers to get your input. Detective Schanke is occupied at present, so Detective Knight will fill you in. We just need the Crown Prosecutor and we'll be set."

A voice came from the doorway. "I see I'm late again."

As laughter greeted this remark, Stonetree stood to greet the newcomer. "As usual, Phil. Come on in; I believe you know everyone here."

Crown Prosecutor Phillippe Rouleau entered with an apologetic smile. He looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy, short -- rotund and jolly, but the merry roundness of his face was belied by the sharp intensity of his flint-grey eyes. Those defense lawyers who had met him in court compared that smile to the lethal grin of a circling shark.

As they took their seats, Rouleau asked, "Anyone hear the one about the trial lawyer and the vampire?"

Groans sounded around the room. Nick's eyebrows rose and a small smile crossed his face. Davenport said, laughing, "Come on, Phil, that's just too obvious. Besides, we've got a full plate here."

"Right," Stonetree said. "As I said before, we're here to keep everyone current with the latest events of the case. I've been in contact with Mark off and on, but I wanted to be sure each of you had the whole picture. Nick, could you give everyone a rundown of what's gone down so far?"

Nick gave a concise account of the events of the night before, closing with the facts in the report on the body that was found and the witnesses on their way to view it. "If it turns out that Detective Schanke ID's the body as Morrison and the witnesses ID him as the victim they saw executed, then from their descriptions of the preps involved we've got quite a few promising leads."

"How reliable are these witnesses, Nick?" Davenport asked.

"They check out as solid citizens, Commissioner," Nick replied, with a quick, level glance. "Both are residents of Seattle, here on business, but there's nothing else at this time, Captain. We are following up with testing at the crime scene and investigating the owners of the warehouse, but so far we've got nothing from it."

"And if this body turns out not to be Morrison, Detective Knight?" Baker asked intently. "Or if your witnesses say that he was not the man they saw executed, what then?"

"Then our possibilities are certainly cut down, Captain Baker, but we're not totally out of options. Fingerprinting at the crime scene, going through more mug shots with the witnesses, investigating Morrison in greater depth -- good legwork may give us a lot to go on."

"Excellent," Baker replied, nodding in satisfaction and sitting back in his chair.

"Suggestions, gentlemen?" Stonetree asked.

"It seems to me that Nick has outlined our options with great clarity, Joe," Rouleau stated, approvingly. "The only other suggestion I can think of is informing all patrol constables and detectives in Metro to be squeezing the street, leaning on any and all sources for any whisper, any rumor about this case."

"Agreed," Stonetree voiced the sentiment of the room. "Anyone else?" When there was no other response, Stonetree continued. "That's all then, everyone. Thanks for your attention. Let's keep the direction of this investigation between us at all costs. Any information that any of you learn, please let us know immediately."

As the meeting broke up, Rouleau and Davenport chatted with Stonetree. Nick stood to find Captain Baker beside him, holding out his hand. As Nick shook his hand, Baker said, "I see Joe was not exaggerating, Detective. Your rescue of the witnesses was phenomenal. What made you and your partner decide to patrol that area?"

Nick shrugged. "Good police work, Captain. A search pattern of widening circles from the crime scene. We were on the scene so soon after the abduction went down, we felt there was a good chance they could have been close by." He was not about to add how vampiric senses had played a part.

Baker's penetrating gaze raked Nick's face. "Good instincts, too, I'll bet. Excellent work, Detective Knight. Perhaps we can make some headway out of this mess. We over at Old Town want to help all we can."

"Thank you, Captain. I'm sure we'll be working closely on it."

Rouleau walked up then. "I overheard Mark's comments about your instincts, Nick. I've seen'em in action before and I'd be interested to know if you have any speculations about this case."

Nick smiled, deprecatingly. "Thank you, gentlemen, but after that accolade I'd better be sure about any hunches before I share them. I wouldn't want to disappoint anyone." His eyes met Stonetree's again, briefly. His Captain gave an infinitesimal nod. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to join my partner at the morgue."

Baker smiled. "Certainly, Detective. We don't want to hold you up. It's just that all of us in this room have come to understand the value of the subliminal clues of a savvy cop like yourself."

At the nods around the room, Stonetree said, "Don't worry. If any of my men have the slightest hunch of any value we'll share it -- as we hope any of you will do."

"Great." Baker glanced at his watch. "God, look at the time. Joe, could I trouble you for those depositions you said I could see?"

"Sure, Mark. Nick, get going -- report to me when you get back from the morgue."

"Right, Captain. Goodnight, gentlemen." Nick opened the door to leave the office on a murmured chorus of farewells. But as soon as he stepped into the squad room, he lost all awareness of their conversation. Mechanically, he pulled the door shut behind him, as he scanned the outer room with all his hyperacute vampiric powers.

Not precisely the same, somehow. Still, very close by, Nick sensed Another.

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Don Schanke watched the two people across the examining table as Natalie prepared to uncover the form that lay there. "Don't worry, Ms. Noël," he said, noting the woman's pale face. "This won't take but a moment, and then we'll done with it. Besides, I'm sure Natalie here has made everything quite presentable."

Natalie smiled reassuringly at Tessa and Richie. "I'm sorry you have to go through this, but don't worry -- it won't be that bad. The body's in fairly good shape, thanks to what they call 'spring' here in Canada." She folded the sheet down to uncover the still, waxy face.

Richie and Tessa looked on with some trepidation, but Schanke was glad to see they showed no sign of faintness. After looking at the face only a moment, Richie looked up at Tessa, who nodded. Richie turned to look at Schanke. "This is the guy we saw killed, Detective... the guy they called Morrison."

* * * * *

Outside in the darkening parking lot, Thomas turned to the men in the back of the truck.

"Rankin, you and Spence take care of the uniforms in the car over there. Roger -- Simon - we'll wait here until they give us the all-clear --so be ready."

Thomas glanced down at his watch. "Okay -- Rankin, Spence -- go."

* * * * *

Duncan MacLeod entered the controlled chaos of the 27th Precinct and glanced around measuringly. He approached the officer at the desk.

The desk sergeant hung up the phone as Duncan approached. He jotted a quick message on a piece of paper. "Hey, Parker," he called to another officer. "Drop this on Reid's desk, would you?"

The message was handed over and the sergeant looked up at MacLeod. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"I hope so, officer," Duncan replied, winningly. "I just got into town to visit some friends and found out they might be here. Their names are Richie Ryan and Tessa Noël. They had to come identify a body or something awful like that."

The officer looked down at a clipboard on his desk. "Let's see, sir... Okay, yes. They're not here presently. They're with Detective Schanke. You can wait for them here if you'd like."

"I don't suppose I could meet them somewhere, could I?" Duncan asked, all innocent charm.

"It's really not regulation, sir. They shouldn't be much longer. I believe Detective Schanke was going to bring them back here to go over some more information."

Duncan shrugged, then nodded. "I'll wait, officer."

* * * * *

Tessa nodded. "Yes, that's the man."

"You have no doubts at all?" Schanke asked, glancing from one to the other.

"No, none," Tessa replied. She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I couldn't forget his face."

"Me neither," Richie replied. "I'm sure, Detective. What now?"

Schanke replied. "I'd like you both to come to the station so my partner and I can go through some more mug shots with you. So far the composite sketches you helped us with haven't turned up any leads."

Tessa and Richie glanced at each other then nodded acquiescence.

As Natalie dropped the sheet back over the dead face, she glanced up to see two men in lab coats enter the room. "Yes, can I help you?" she asked.

"I believe so, Dr. Lambert," the taller man replied pleasantly.

That was when Natalie saw their guns. "Schanke!" she shouted. "Weapons!"

Suddenly everything was a blur. Schanke whirled to face the intruders, instinctively going for his gun.

"Get down!" Natalie cried, diving to the floor behind the autopsy table. Richie followed suit, pulling Tessa down with him.

And then one of the semi-automatics thundered twice.

* * * * *

MacLeod stood at a window of the 27th Precinct station house, staring down sightlessly at the comings and goings in the parking lot below. Suddenly, a sensation undetectable by the mortals around him caused Duncan's head to snap up. He spun around, studying the milling crowd. He threaded his way slowly through the press of people in front of the desk. He followed a sense that was neither sight nor sound nor smell but instead a resonance within his bones and blood, a resonance from one who was also immortal.

Duncan had just rounded the desk when he was able to see across to the detectives' squad room beyond. Suddenly, the resonance pulled his eyes to a tall man standing at the door of an office on the other side of that room. The man's head was turned away as he, too, seemed to be caught at attention. But there was something about the stance, the carriage and the blond hair that Duncan found strangely familiar.

As the man turned his head, scanning the crowd, Duncan glimpsed his face. In a single moment, three hundred years fell away...

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The room was low-ceilinged and dark, its only light coming from a small peat fire and a single candle. That light flickered over stone walls and simple furnishings, and barely brushed broad, smoke-stained beams. Scents intermingled and enriched the air—the earthiness of burning peat, the spiciness of herbs, the sweetness of heather and the clean freshness of rainwater. The only sounds in the room were the gentle hissing of the fire, the insistent tapping of rain of the thatched roof and the soft scrape of the whetstone wielded by the one wakeful occupant of the room.

Duncan MacLeod sat near the fire, lovingly burnishing the edge of his blade, comforted by the sights, sounds and smells of the cottage. After all, it was in a place very like this that he had been raised over half a century ago. And this was the first time he had returned to the Highlands, drawn by a call to his blood and heritage which he could not ignore.

Luckily, he thought, few remembered the bewitched changelings of Clan MacLeod, Connor and Duncan, and those who did spoke of them as legend. Indeed, the MacLeod of MacLeod had welcomed him hospitably with his story of being from a branch of the clan from the Isle of Skye. The welcome had become right royal when the chief saw what skills this new warrior added to his ranks in these troublous times. And that welcome had included this cottage. Of course, it was nothing to the nobles' homes Duncan had seen — and lived in — in England and on the continent — despite the flagstone floor, sturdy shutters and stone fireplace. No doubt it would compare unfavorably to the house of his "guest" with his black velvet doublet, Flemish lace and fine linen shirt and small clothes.

Duncan frowned over at the dim corner and the still form lying on the bed. That Nicholas was not mortal Duncan knew as fact. He had felt the resonance from the first.

However, there were puzzling differences. On arriving at the cottage, Duncan had started to remove Nicholas' rich clothing and wondered what had happened to the blood that had drenched them. As he was removing the makeshift bandages, he found that these, too, were less bloody than he would have thought possible. It was as though the healing wounds had drawn back in all of that vital fluid. In fact, as he removed the last bandage on Nick's shoulder, Duncan saw evidence of this. The blood that surrounded the open wound was slowly being absorbed inside as the angry ripped flesh began to fade to a healing pink. Duncan had sat back, perplexed by the difference between what he had just witnessed and the method of his own healing.

A slightly deeper sigh of breath drew Duncan's eyes to the bed. Wondering if his strange guest was waking, Duncan carefully placed his sword and whetstone on the table and, taking up his candle, stepped to the bed. He sat down on the stool at the bedside, placed the candle in the candlestand, and turned to observe his patient.

Thick blond eyelashes still rested on waxy pale cheeks though the eyes moved beneath the eyelids as though following dark dreams. The shorter blond curls around the face were no longer matted by blood. Longer blond curls tumbled around bare, broad shoulders and framed a face that was paper white. Earlier, Duncan had touched Nicholas' face to check for fever and had found instead an uncanny coldness – not of death but of a smooth stone in winter.

Duncan reached out to check for fever again.

With a swiftness too great for his eyes to follow or his mind to accept, Duncan's wrist and throat were caught in a crushing grip. Nicholas' face was instantly inches from his own. In that face, Duncan saw a beast with glowing yellow eyes and threatening fangs.

Before his gaze could be trapped by that hypnotic one, Duncan tore his eyes away. Struggling against his own fear of the growling, ravening creature before him and against the grasp that was pulling him closer, Duncan managed to gasp out, "Are ye what I killed to save?"

The growling ceased abruptly and the grip on his throat loosened slightly. Duncan dared to glance up quickly. There was something close to recognition, close to humanity in the golden eyes. The fierce gaze bore in on Duncan now as a puzzle to be solved, not as prey to be subdued. Then it flickered quickly over their firelit surroundings.

Looking back at Duncan, the beast who had been Nicholas de Brabrant remembered. "Twas thee," he whispered. "Thee saved me from the soldiers."

"Aye," Duncan choked out. He watched as the yellow eyes closed and the muscles in chest and arms tensed as if in some titanic internal struggle. Abruptly, Nicholas released him with a quick twist of his wrists that knocked the Scotsman clear back to the table.

Duncan rolled to his feet, coughing, and caught up his sword. Not taking his eyes from Nicholas, Duncan crouched into a battle posture. "Perhaps I have made a mistake," he said hoarsely.

Nicholas stayed as he was, sitting up on the bed, tartan bedcover over his bare hips. His glowing eyes watched Duncan unblinkingly. "Perhaps thou hast. But didst thou save me just to kill me now?"

Duncan's posture relaxed slightly though he kept his sword at ready. He studied his strange guest for a moment. "Wha' in the name of the Blessed Virgin are ye?"

Nicholas flinched as if in momentary pain.

"Are ye one of the Uruisg?" Duncan demanded.

"Say the word in English. I know little of this Gaelic tongue."

"A human monster," Duncan replied. "We have legends of such."

"Both and neither," Nicholas replied, still watching Duncan unwaveringly. "I am a child of the night. I am a vampire."

Duncan gasped and drew back. He genuflected and again Nicholas flinched away as if in brief pain. "Bodach na h-Oidhche!" Duncan whispered. "Spirit of the Night. Ye... drink men's blood?"

Nicholas turned back to watch Duncan. He nodded slowly.

Duncan's face filled with revulsion and anger. "Mayhap I should finish what those soldiers started."

Nicholas' stillness was absolute but Duncan's keen sixth sense of danger felt it as the stillness of a coiled viper. "Mayhap thee could try," Nicholas replied in a voice threaded with a dangerous quiet. He smiled ever so slightly. "And it may be one such as thee might, possibly succeed. But since thou'st done this much, thee could at the least give me a hearing... in particular because I sense that we are much alike. Indeed, did thee not say so thyself?"

Duncan paused. The muscles of his face tightened and a haunted look crept into his dark eyes. Finally, he spoke – too quickly, too vehemently. "Nay, I was wrong. I'm not like thee – I am no' a monster."

"Art thou not?"

"Nay – nay, I'm not!"

"Thou felt it before," Nicholas said, quietly, inexorably. "I did not then, in my extremity. But I feel it now, as you must – that sense that no mortal knows – that unheard pulsing of kinship with immortal blood in immortal veins. Art thou not like me, then?"

"I do no' hae to kill to live," Duncan said, jaw muscles bunching.

"Does thee not? And what then shapes thy immortality? How was it attained?"

"I do not know!" The whisper was wrung from Duncan. He swallowed. "I only know that nearly eighty years ago, when I was but twenty, I fell in battle. Ma father held me as I died. Not long after, I woke up — healed and well. I was cast out as a witch and my father disowned me, saying I was a changeling, put in the place of his own dead son."

"And are thee alone in this situation?"

"Nay, there are others like me, some guid, some not so guid, some purely evil. A guid one found me soon after ma banishment and taught me what I needed to know to survive."

"And what would that be?" Nicholas asked quietly.

Duncan looked at him out of narrowed eyes. "Tha' in the end there can be only one of us. Tha' later, in time, there will be a Gathering when we, one by one, find who that last one will be. That the last Immortal will be able to use the power of all the others to shape the destiny of all humankind."

Nicholas shifted his position to lean against the wall. He briefly closed his eyes and when he reopened them, Duncan saw that they were again dark blue and that the fangs were gone. He again looked like a man, a sick man with dark circles smudging his eyes.

"There is a difference," Nicholas replied then, "but is it so great?"

"I kill because I have no choice. It is by necessity!" Duncan cried.

"As it is for me," Nicholas answered.

Duncan's face was shadowed by doubt. He sat down slowly in the chair by the table. "And did ye no' have a choice in what ye are?"

Nicholas looked away, his own face tightening with old pain. After several moments he spoke. "Yes, I had a choice — of a sort," he answered, quietly. "But also I was chosen. He who chose me would not have accepted 'no' as an answer. So this choice — or death — was inevitable."

He looked back at Duncan, and in his face, Duncan could see disparate emotions warring — triumph and tragedy, power and misery, ecstasy and wretchedness. "Darkness chose me and my own darkness rose up and answered. I did not fully realize all I was choosing."

Duncan watched Nicholas' face as he spoke and felt some of his revulsion fading. "Many times I hae not, either," he replied quietly.

Their eyes met and wordlessly a recognition of their kinship was exchanged.

After a moment, Duncan asked, "Why were those soldiers chasin' ye? Ye are all English together, are ye no'?"

"Not precisely — though of late I've lived in London. I was born in Caen of a Norman father and a Saxon mother. And at that time all Englishmen of my class spoke French."

"God's blood! Whenever was tha'?" Duncan asked, thunderstruck.

Nicholas smiled slightly. "In the year 1193."

"Holy Mother of God!" Duncan whispered. "Four hundred and fifty years, and yet I'd swear ye were n'more than five and thirty. Truly I called thee 'Bodach' rightly."

Nicholas frowned in bewilderment. "Why is that?"

"Because, besides meaning 'spirit' 'bodach' also means 'old man' — which ye are to a lad of fifty-eight like myself."

Nicholas' smile widened. "A mere babe," he said quietly.

"But no' so young that I hae no' noticed that ye did neatly avoid my question, sir."

"What question, sir?"

"The question of why those soldiers were tryin' to kill ye, Nicholas de Brabrant," Duncan asked sternly.

Nicholas' smile faded, but his answer was steady. "They thought I was defiling one of their dead."

Duncan's face hardened. "And what were ye doing?"

Nicholas' pale face was again expressionless, his bruised eyes watchful. "I was feeding from a dying young Roundhead soldier who asked me for death."

Duncan's heavy eyebrows lowered in a frown. "And will ye be tellin' me tha' ye hae ne'er fed from one who did no' ask for death?"

Nicholas' face was all at once bone-white, his blue eyes equally fierce and anguished, just before he closed them. His head dropped back against the stone wall. "No," came his whisper, "I cannot." After a moment, his eyes reopened and he studied Duncan with desperate intensity. "And wilt thou be telling me,

Duncan MacLeod, that thou'st has killed only Immortals and only by necessity? Did none of those mortals on that field tonight die by thy sword?"

Duncan stood abruptly and walked to the fireplace with a swirl of his kilt. He knelt and placed another block of peat on the fire. After a long moment he glanced up at Nick with the glowing firelight warring with the shadows on his face. His brown eyes looked wounded. "Nay... I canno' tell ye tha' either, Nicholas," he answered, quietly. He looked back at the fire. "It would seem that we are indeed much alike."

"Does that mean thou'st decided not to kill me?" Nicholas asked, watching Duncan's face.

MacLeod looked at him wistfully. "For now. How can I pass judgment on ye?"

"It is unneeded. I am already judged and damned," Nicholas replied, wretchedly. He paused a moment, then continued. "If then thou shalt not... I need to feed."

Duncan's head snapped up. "No' from me or my people!" he exclaimed. "I will kill ye, for sure, if ye try."

Nicholas shook his head and replied quickly, "I did not mean to repay thee so meanly. I owe thee too much." Ruefully he continued, "I can survive with the blood of a sheep -- or a cow."

Duncan's disgust was palpable, but he nodded, standing. "I will hae one blooded for ye. I suppose I can say I fancy a black puddin' for breakfast."

Nicholas sat up, away from the wall and slowly gathered the woolen tartan around him. Duncan watched him a moment, then spoke. "Ye may stay until ye are healed -- no longer," he said, firmly. "If anyone should have reason to meet ye, I shall say ye're Neàcail MacDonald, ma foster brother from home, come to bring me messages. But, as soon as ye are able and well, ye must leave this place -- and this country."

"Very well -- so shall it be," Nicholas answered. He caught hold of the bedpost and pulled himself up, shakily, to his feet, holding the tartan around himself with one hand and the bedpost with the other. "I am greatly in thy debt, Duncan MacLeod. I shall not forget."

Duncan frowned and stepped closer. "Ye needn't stand, ye stupid Sassenach!"

"To thank thee appropriately I must," Nicholas replied, breathless with exhaustion.

And then he bowed.

It was a small, careful bow, but it proved too much for Nicholas' spent resources. Duncan was already moving and caught Nicholas as he collapsed...

* * * * *

...Three and a half centuries streaked back into place and, through the receding haze of memory, Duncan realized Nicholas was before him, smiling wonderingly, hand outstretched.

"Duncan," he said, gladly.

Duncan's smile was equally surprised and delighted. "Nicholas," he answered.

Instinctively, they each clasped the other's forearm in a warrior's greeting.

* * * * *

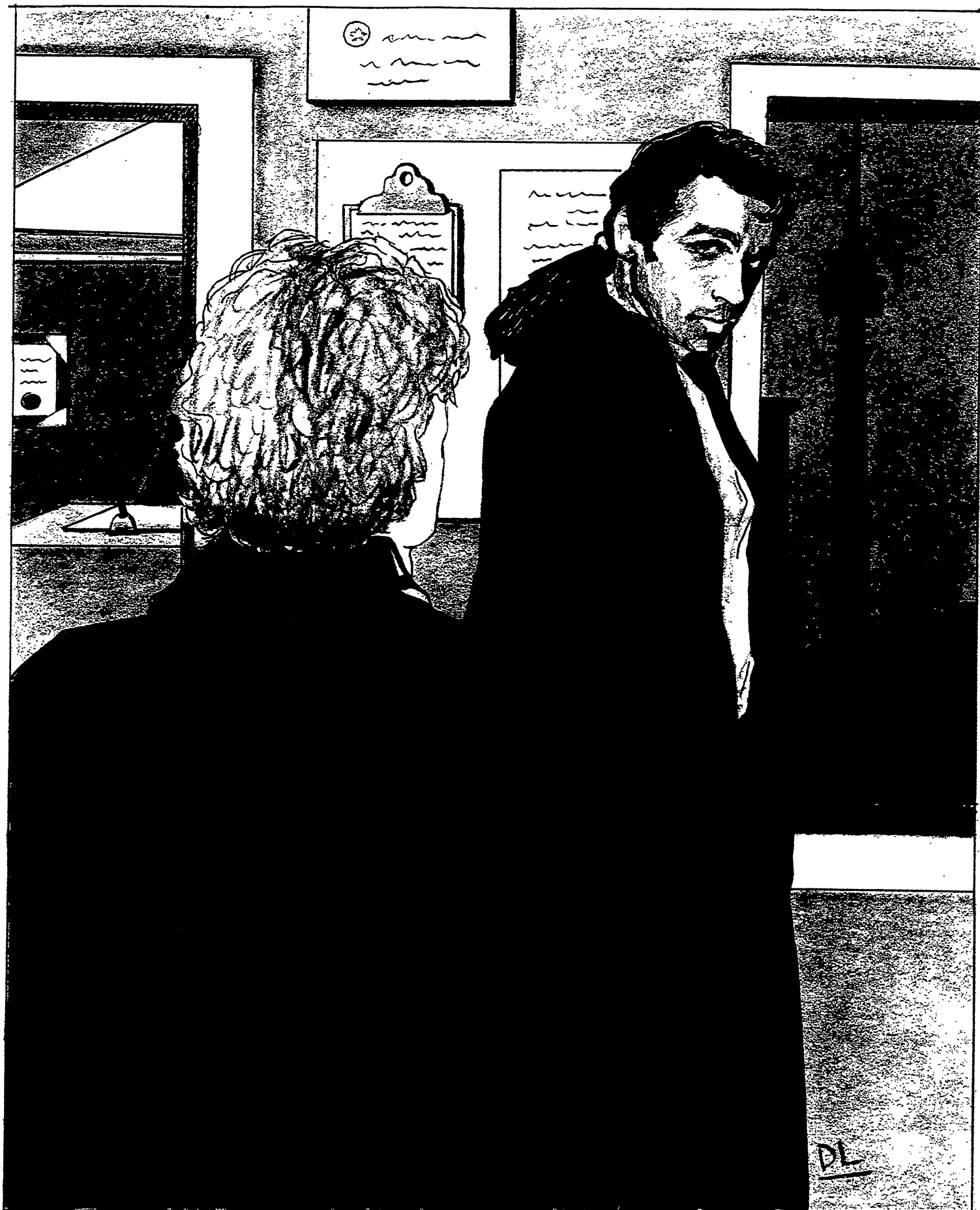
Natalie hit the floor as the sharp report of the semi-automatic split the air, still loud in the small space despite the silencer. There was a cry and a crash. She lunged to the corner of the autopsy table, past Tessa and Richie, just as Don Schanke collapsed heavily to the floor. Bright red blood splattered outward from his forehead -- several drops hit Natalie's sleeve.

"Schanke!" she shouted. She leaped forward, oblivious to her own danger in her anxiety. On her knees beside him, she felt for the carotid artery in his neck. The pulse throbbed beneath her fingers and Natalie gulped air thankfully.

"All right, ladies and gentleman, let's just be calm," came the voice of one of the intruders. "We don't want to hurt anyone."

Natalie looked up to see the taller man above them with his gun still trained on Schanke. "Too late for that!" she snapped.

"My associate and I just came to invite all of you to be guests of my employer." He shrugged. "Too bad the cop chose such an...inappropriate way to RSVP." The man spoke genially, but watched them with cruel eyes. "I'm afraid he just can't take 'no' for an answer."



* * * * *

"How are you, old Barbarian?" Nicholas asked.

Duncan's smile widened. "I am better now, Nicholas -- seeing you after so long!" he exclaimed. "And who are *you* calling 'old' -- or a barbarian -- *Bodach?*"

Nicholas laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. They released their warrior's grip.

"How are *you*, Nick?" Duncan asked, studying him closely.

"Quite well, actually."

Duncan nodded. "You look it. Your color has definitely improved." He glanced around quickly, then continued, quietly in Gaelic. "What the hell are *you* doing *here?*"

Nick grinned. Innocently, but with his eyes alight with wicked laughter, he answered in the same language, "I work here."

Duncan's eyes widened and then it was his turn to laugh. "Are you serious? You're a cop?" he asked. Nick, still grinning, nodded.

Duncan's infectious laugh caused several heads turn their way. Nick absently noticed Stonetree's door open and the others that were in the meeting begin to exit as he pulled Duncan to a far corner of the squad room. Duncan's laughter subsided but it remained in his dark eyes. He asked, still carefully in Gaelic, "Isn't that a bit like the wolf guarding the sheep?"

Nick chuckled but his eyes met MacLeod's with some seriousness. "Perhaps. But who better to guard them against other wolves?"

"True," Duncan mused, his laughter fading. "I suppose a wolf's... *talents* make him uniquely qualified for the job... as long as he can control his appetite for mutton."

Nick nodded, also serious. "My continuing battle. Being a cop is a good way to pay for my past, and to continue the search for a way to become human again, but it's not easy. I've used my... unique abilities, as you call them, but I've managed to fight the urge for human blood."

Duncan replied quietly, "I'm glad for you, Nick."

"Thanks. Now -- what are *you* doing in T-O? Especially in this place?"

"Waiting for friends. Here we are in what's supposed to be 'Toronto the Good' and they have the misfortune to witness a murder. So--"

"Wait a minute! Your friends -- Tessa Noël and Richie Ryan?"

"Yes -- how did you..." Duncan stared at Nick. "Of course! It's your case! *You're* the Detective Knight they mentioned. I'd have never guessed... I don't remember you using that name before."

"I haven't... not for a very long time." Nick's eyes were distant briefly then returned to Duncan's. "But yes, that's me -- in this incarnation."

"Quite an amazing coincidence!"

"MacLeod, you've lived long enough to know that there's no such thing as coincidence!" Nick replied. Switching back to English, he continued, "Did you come to find your friends?"

Duncan nodded. "Tessa didn't want me coming with them. She was afraid that I might have to answer dangerous questions."

Nick laughed. "Well, since I'm the investigating officer and I already know the answers to those questions, you don't have to worry about that. So, would you like to go meet them at the morgue? I'm on my way there now." They began walking toward the door of the squad room as they talked.

"I'd appreciate that, Nick. For some reason I have a bad feeling about all this."

Nick frowned. "You, too, eh? That's why I had the uniforms watching your building since they dropped off Tessa and Richie. Look, we'll talk more about this on the way. Let me speak to my Captain and we'll be going."

"Sure."

The Scotsman stayed where he was, watching as Nick walked over to a tall, heavy-set man Duncan assumed was the captain. The older man was standing by an office door in conversation with two other men. Nick spoke quietly to the man and with a quick word to the others with him, stepped away to converse privately together for a few moments. Soon, Nick turned away and started back towards Duncan, replying to goodbyes from the men whom his captain rejoined.

As Nick led Duncan toward the door of the squad room, Duncan noticed the grim look on his face. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

"No... at least, I don't know yet. I just had to let my Captain know it might be a while before he hears from us." Seeing Duncan's concerned look, Nick added, "I'll tell you about it in the car. Let's roll."

* * * * *

In a darkened office, the lone occupant punched a quick succession of numbers into a cellular phone. There was silence for a moment as he waited for an answer. It came, obviously, for he spoke, quietly, "Roger -- is the plan underway?"

A pause and his quiet voice continued, "Very good. No, there won't be time for him to get there before your men are out. There is another development, however. I must report it to Monseigneur."

Another pause and then he continued, "Yes, Monseigneur, it is I. The meeting went as expected and I was able to detain our quarry long enough, but I was not the only one to keep him. He left the meeting a little earlier and when we came out I saw him deep in conversation with Duncan MacLeod."

The speaker paused again, listened briefly, then continued, "Yes, sir. Their conversation was animated. It seemed as though they were acquaintances of some long standing. And, more than that... something about seeing them together bothered me. To look at them, it would seem they were opposite, but there was a likeness between them I could not put my finger on... a feeling of similar power, danger and strength. I don't understand it, but you have never despised such observations before, I thought you would want to know, even if it means nothing."

One more pause and the speaker concluded, "Very well, Monseigneur, I'm glad you approve. Yes, we will certainly distract their attention. In fact, we've wounded them in the heart and they don't even know it yet."

* * * * *

Natalie winced as she was pushed, none too gently, into the back of a panelled truck. She caught Tessa as she was also propelled roughly inside. Both women supported Richie as he was thrown in, then held him as he lunged back toward their armed abductors.

"Bastards!" Richie spat.

"Stop it, Richie!" Natalie said firmly. She held the young man's arm but watched the kidnappers intently. "Remember what they said."

"*Don't try anything stupid, friends,*" the leader had instructed them jovially. "*Our boss wants you alive, but if we have to kill you, it'll work about as well.*"

"Yes, please remember it, Richie," the leader echoed pleasantly, but his cold gaze was intent on the younger man.

"All of you -- move back. Now!" the leader continued. The three captives obeyed. The other two kidnappers approached the truck, Schanke suspended unconscious between them, his arms held over their shoulders. Grunting as they shifted the dead weight of their burden, the two men laid Schanke down on the floor of the truck. Pushing the unconscious detective until he was well inside, the two climbed in and sat on seats on either side of the door. The leader of the group pounded on the side of the truck as he climbed in, slammed the rear door, and sat on the floor. The driver had apparently been awaiting this signal, the truck engine roared to life and they pulled off.

Natalie glimpsed the familiar bulk of the Coroner's Building receding in the growing darkness out the back window. She thrust down her fear with her doctor's instincts, and slid from her seat to Schanke's side.

Immediately, three guns were trained on her.

"What do you think you're doing?" the leader asked, pleasantly, dangerously.

Natalie looked up at him fiercely, wishing she could punch that predatory smile from his face. "I am a doctor," she replied, voice even but laced with fury. "If your... employer--" she spat the word -- "doesn't want anyone hurt, then you'll let me treat this man!"

The leader shrugged. "Go ahead."

"I need a flashlight and a first aid kit!" she demanded.

The leader smiled maddeningly at Natalie's uncowed vehemence. From his seat on the floor at the very back, he reached over and rummaged in a small locker that opened out from beneath the seat. After a brief search, both articles were handed to Natalie.

She took them wordlessly, then trained the light on Schanke's wound which was still bleeding steadily. Without looking up, she said, "I'll need some help."

The leader motioned to Tessa. "Help her," he ordered.

Tessa knelt on Schanke's other side. She and Natalie exchanged intent glances but neither spoke as Natalie handed her the flashlight, both aware of the guards' scrutiny. "*Salaud*," Tessa muttered, in a tone only Natalie could hear. The doctor's mouth quirked up but she kept her attention on her work. For some time, they exchanged only occasional remarks, as Natalie directed Tessa to change the angle of the light or to hand her an item from the first aid kit.

After several moments of this exchange, Natalie said in the same quiet tone, "Thank God, it's just a graze. Deep enough and bleeding to hell and gone, like all scalp wounds. But I can't feel any obvious skull fracture, and his pupils are equal and reactive to light."

"Which means?" Tessa asked, also quietly. She watched Natalie's eyes flick over their captors surreptitiously. Satisfied with their lessened attention, the doctor answered.

"It means he probably doesn't have any bleeding in his brain, thankfully. But he might have a concussion -- how severe remains to be seen -- and one hell of a headache."

Natalie glanced up again, then back to Schanke's wound. "Are you all right?"

"I think so -- except for the current circumstances."

Natalie hid a smile, keeping her gaze on her work. Placing several small bandages across the wound to pull the edges together, she continued speaking softly.

"These guys seem to want us alive and reasonably healthy, so we need to stay cool until that changes. Tell Richie he's got to stay calm. Do you have anyone expecting you? Someone who might come soon to ask about you?"

"No... well, actually, there is someone. Looking back on it, he may be anxious enough to come to the station after us, though I told him not to," Tessa smiled.

Natalie glanced up at her. "A special someone, I think."

"Yes, very," Tessa replied, handing Natalie a sterile gauze pad. As Natalie dressed the wound, Tessa went on.

"What about Detective Knight? How soon would he miss us?"

Natalie slowly applied tape to the dressing. "Actually, I'm surprised he wasn't at the morgue as soon as the... ah... night shift began. I can't imagine him being long in getting there."

"Do you think he'll be able to find us?" Tessa asked.

"I don't know, but I know he won't stop trying," Natalie replied, making a show of checking Schanke's pupils again. "Schanke is his partner. Between cops, that's a special relationship. And I--"

Tessa saw Natalie's cheeks flush as she bent over the prone detective.

"Nick and I are good friends." Natalie looked up and met Tessa's gaze and a wealth of understanding passed wordlessly between them.

"Anyway -- Nick will know someone was hurt. He'll do everything in his power to find us. And believe me -- that's considerable."

Tessa gazed at Natalie quizzically. "He sounds a lot like Duncan."

Natalie raised her eyebrows. "Do you think your Duncan will try to find us, too?"

Tessa nodded. "It would be interesting if they ran into each other on our trail."

Natalie began replacing items in the first aid kit. "If there is a trail," she replied, quietly.

* * * * *

As the Caddy pulled out of the police lot, Duncan glanced over at Nick's profile. "So, how long has it been?" he asked, rolling his window up against the icy April breeze.

"Let's see -- was it Hong Kong... 1922? The little dust up with that *tong* family?" Nick mused.

"You mean that fight when you pulled my ass out of the fire?" Duncan asked, chuckling.

Nick glanced at him, grinning. "I suppose it was a bit more drastic." He looked back to the street, then continued. "No -- I remember. The last time was that party in Paris -- a month after V-E day."

"Oh, God, I'd almost forgot about that night!" Duncan laughed.

"Those nights, you mean," Nick answered. "It wouldn't surprise me. In fact, I wonder how you remember them at all."

"Listen to you! I seem to remember that you were fairly plastered yourself."

"I suppose I was, although I was not drinking... wine."

Duncan groaned. "That's a tired old quip, even for you." He glanced at Nick. "If it wasn't wine..."

"It wasn't human either," Nick answered, quietly. "It hasn't been human for one hundred years now." Duncan nodded. After a moment's pause, Nick continued. "I don't know if I told you back then, but you're part of the reason."

"The reason?"

"Why I stopped killing to feed... why I've been searching for a way to become mortal again," Nick replied, quietly. "Joan of Arc started it."

Duncan's eyebrows lifted. "Joan of Arc?"

Nick nodded, his eyes on the road but seeing a vision of flames. "She showed me that purity still existed... and reawoke my need for it," Nick answered, his voice echoing with six hundred years of pathos. He swallowed and looked at Duncan.

"When you rescued me... let me stay for what turned into months... I saw someone whose immortality held the same kind of demons as mine -- power, greed, megalomania. But you fought them -- fought yourself to serve the good of humanity."

"I saw that kinship, too," Duncan said after a moment's reflection. "Damn, I hated it, but it made me think, as well, you know, there was a time I wondered if I'd done the right thing letting you live."

"*'Letting'* me live, young Barbarian?" Nick's eyes narrowed, his voice hardened.

"*'Letting'* you live, *Bodach!*" Duncan's reply was firm, challenging. "That one time, at least, when you were weak and vulnerable -- I could have taken you."

"Perhaps. Why didn't you?"

"That sense of kinship. I realized if I passed judgement on you, I had to judge myself on the same scale. It was a lesson I needed to learn. Besides which, I saw much in you to like," Duncan answered more quietly.

Nick grinned, but his eyes were intent as he glanced at Duncan. "But, thank you -- anyway," he said, softly.

"You're welcome. Not that you haven't paid me back -- quite a few times."

"Not yet, Barbarian," Nick said, firmly. Shifting in his seat, he glanced at Duncan. "So -- your friends - Richie and Tessa. Tell me about them," he invited.

"Well... Richie is a street kid we more or less adopted. We actually met when he was robbing my shop... I'm an antiques dealer now," Duncan added at Nick's questioning look.

"Appropriate, since you're an antique yourself."

"Don't start," Duncan chided.

"Sorry," Nick grinned. "And Tessa?"

"She's an artist -- a sculptor. She mainly works in metal, but she dabbles in other media. We've been together for twelve years now, so you could certainly call her my wife though we haven't had the ceremony. She's... she's a beautiful lady, Nick. These last twelve years have made up for a lot in the previous four hundred."

"I'm glad for you, Mac," Nick said, seriously.

"Thanks. Now - what the hell have they gotten involved in, Nick? How dangerous is it?"

"That's just it, Mac, we don't know for certain. But it's big." Nick's tone was grim. He summarized the events that had led up to Morrison's murder. "So you see, we're dealing with major players," Nick continued grimly. "The information Morrison gave us initially told us that. With everything that has occurred since then, it's obvious he only described the tip of the iceberg."

"Damn," Duncan whispered.

"Right. The other thing I'm concerned about is--"

Nick broke off abruptly as his police radio crackled to life. "All units in the vicinity of Grenville and Queen Street West," the dispatcher's voice rapped out commandingly. "Possible 10-90 in progress at the Coroner's Building. Shots fired. All units respond. Code two."

"Bloody hell!" Nick swore. He caught up the mike. "This is 81 Kilo. My 10-20 is the corner of Queen and Youge. Responding -- code two."

"What the devil--" Duncan began, as Nick hit the siren and floored the accelerator. He began weaving heart-stoppingly through the evening traffic.

Nick broke in tersely. "Open the glove box, get out the emergency flasher and put it on the dash."

Duncan responded without question to the desperate urgency in Nick's voice. Momentarily the blue light strobed over them in the darkness. Glancing at Nick's strained pale face, Duncan felt his stomach twist with adrenaline.

"There's something serious going down at the Coroner's Building," Nick bit out grimly. "That's where the morgue is -- where Schanke took your friends."

"What's a 10-90?" Duncan asked, harshly.

"Possible kidnapping."

Duncan's jaw muscles bunched. "How much further is it?"

Nick careened around a corner and into a parking lot where two marked units were already parked. "We're here!" Nick stated, screeching to a halt. He cut off the car, pulled his weapon and was out in motions almost too fast for Duncan's perception. Duncan thrust open his door and leapt out.

"Stay behind me," Nick flung over his shoulder as he slowly approached the parked police car. He held his gun in firing position out before him and his eyes raked the scene, searching for potential danger. Duncan followed him, instinctively assuming a rearguard stance.

They reached the car and Nick kept his gun in position as he glanced in the back then to the front seat. "No!" Duncan heard Nick's broken whisper. He glanced around to see the detective raise his gun out of firing position and open the car door. The uniformed figure behind the wheel slumped outward, and Duncan saw blood smeared across the steering wheel and dash. The other constable was also shot through the head from behind.

"Professionals with .22's at close range, just like Morrison," Nick informed him tersely.

"You knew them?" Duncan asked.

Nick nodded, pushing the door shut gently. He motioned toward the entrance to the Coroner's Building. As he led the way, Nick said, "Fancelli and Cusack. I ordered them to watch Richie and Tessa. And now they're dead."

Duncan glanced at Nick and saw grief and fear in his face. Before MacLeod could speak, Nick growled. "Let's go in."

As they reached the door, a heavy-set black woman with a beautiful face met them. Nick quickly holstered his gun. "Oh, Nick, thank God!" she cried her face tear-streaked. Nick caught her arms.

"Grace -- what the hell is happening?" Nick demanded, dread in his voice.

"Oh, my God - it's so terrible!" she choked out. "Someone's kidnapped Natalie."

"When?"

"I'm not sure -- about fifteen minutes ago. And Schanke --"

Nick shook her gently as her control threatened to break. "What about Schanke, Grace?"

"Oh, Nick... I am so sorry," she whispered. "I think he may be dead!"

Nick released her arms and turned away, his fists clenched white-knuckled at his sides. Duncan put a hand on Nick's shoulder but spoke to Grace. "Can you start from the beginning and tell us exactly what happened?"

Grace blinked at Duncan tearfully, doubtfully, but responded to his tone of command. With a deep breath, she answered with more control. "I was working in the test lab several doors down. I heard a faint bang... I -- I thought a car had backfired out in the parking lot just outside. I didn't think anything more until I glanced out and saw several people crossing the parking lot. Suddenly, I realized Natalie was with them. I was puzzled because I knew she was too busy to be going anywhere and certainly not in her scrubs. And then a man behind her grabbed her arm and pushed her toward a panelled truck. I knew then something was really wrong."

Nick turned back to face Grace as she spoke. Glancing at him, Duncan saw the bone-white pallor of a man mortally wounded.

"Was Natalie all right?" Nick demanded, with painful intensity.

"Yes, I think so. Oh, and there was a man and woman with her -- they looked okay, too."

"A man and woman?" Duncan echoed sharply. "What did they look like?"

"The woman was a blonde, tall and striking. The man was also blond... young and slightly shorter," Grace answered.

Duncan's eyes met Nick's, with a mirroring anguish. "Damn it!" the highlander swore.

"And Schanke?" Nick rapped out.

"A couple of men were following the others, carrying him, almost dragging him. He looked like a... a dead weight," Grace replied desolately.

"You're sure it was him?" Nick persisted.

"Yes," Grace rambled on. "There was still some light in the sky and the streetlights were coming on. I saw his face when they pushed in the truck and I -- I could see his sideburns."

Duncan frowned, puzzled, but saw hopeless acceptance flood Nick's face at these words.

"Oh -- but Nick -- I got the license number!" the lab tech suddenly exclaimed, dragging a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket.

"Good work!" Nick breathed.

"Not good enough," she whispered.

"Yes it was!" Nick stated firmly, hugging her gently. "Without you, Grace, we'd have nothing. Now we've got a place to start."

They had reached the door to Natalie's lab when footsteps echoed down the hall behind them. Nick turned to meet the two constables as they pounded up. "Detective Knight!" PC Clive Grant called out. "Situation stable?"

"Yeah, it's already gone down," Nick answered, thrusting aside his personal pain for professional practicality. "At least three perps -- they grabbed Dr. Lambert, two witnesses... and my partner. And Schanke was injured -- shot. Possibly..." Nick could not bring himself to say the word, "possibly worse."

"Shit!" PC Grant swore, exchanging glances with his partner.

Nick nodded. "There's more. Fancelli and Cusack--"

"We saw them," PC Paul Shin returned tersely.

"Okay," Nick sighed. "Paul, you go call it in, then secure the area around Fancelli's and Cusack's unit. Clive, take Grace someplace quiet and take down her statement. Get a description of the truck. And make sure Natalie's back-up from Forensics is called in."

Both constables nodded and moved off, Grace following PC Grant.

Nick turned to Duncan. "Let's check the lab now before someone asks for your I.D. Just don't touch anything!"

They entered the room, the door swinging shut behind them. Both immediately noticed the instrument table and its contents spilled onto the floor towards the far side of the large autopsy table which still held Morrison's body.

"Oh, no!" Nick whispered. The fear in his voice spurred Duncan to follow him. Stepping over the clutter, Duncan looked over the detective's shoulder, following his gaze to the floor. A spattering of darkening crimson drops dotted the floor at the opposite end of the table. These led to a slightly larger pool of blood, at which Nick now knelt. Coming up beside him, Duncan saw Nick dip the tip of a finger into the clotting puddle.

"Watch the door!" Nick commanded.

Duncan was startled to see the feral gold eyes and sharp fangs transfigure Knight's face. "Nick -- what the hell are you--"

"Silence!" Nick grated as he brought the blood-tipped finger towards his face, obviously smelling it, then touching it with the tip of his tongue.

Duncan watched as his lips drew back from his teeth and a deep growl began in his throat. Glancing anxiously at the door, he whispered, "For God's sake Nick, someone could come in any time!"

"So tell me if they do, Barbarian," Nicholas growled, trapping Duncan's eyes with his hot yellow gaze. He touched his tongue to the blood on his fingers once more and then looked back down. When Nick raised his head once more, Duncan was relieved to see his face had resumed his mask of humanity. "This blood is A negative," Nick whispered. "Schanke. It's Schanke's."

Urged by the desperation in Nick's voice, Duncan knelt beside him. "You can't know for certain it's his," he said gently.

Nick shook his head. "I *know* it's his. You couldn't understand, but a vampire can sense blood in a way no mortal can."

"But that doesn't prove he's dead."

"I hope you're right," Nick replied fervently as he rose quickly. Avoiding the blood stain, he made a quick circuit of the room. Duncan stood also, but remained still, watching Nick study the scene. The growing wail of sirens penetrated from outside.

The homicide detective glanced up. "Mac, you'd better leave now. There'll be difficult questions for both of us if anyone finds I've allowed a civilian into a crime scene. Wait for me in the car. I need to know if there's anything else to be found here."

Duncan nodded in acquiescence but his own fears found voice. "Is there anything to go on? We've got to find them, Nick."

"We will," Nick vowed grimly. "We can start with what Grace has given us."

Running feet could be heard not far away.

"Go, Mac!" Nick commanded. "Turn right go to the end of the hall and turn left. Get out to the car and wait. If anyone asks, you're with me."

"Hurry, Nick!" Duncan whirled and was gone.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, Duncan sat in the Caddy, tapping his fingers on the closed door. Suddenly, Nick appeared at the driver's side, opened the door and slid in quickly.

"Okay, we've got things rolling," he said. "We've got APBs out on the truck. Grace will be working with a sketch artist to get composites on the kidnappers. They're dusting for prints, and ballistics is searching for the slug."

"What can *we* do?" Duncan demanded. "We can't just sit still."

"We're not," Nick replied as he started the car. "In fact, it may come down to only us."

"Why?"

He looked at Duncan, "Because now I'm sure there's a Judas on the force."

The highlander frowned. "What makes you think that?"

Nick looked forward, guiding the car though the maze of police cars now filling the lot. "When Morrison was taken, no one on my level knew all the details of the operation. And now this -- only someone with deep inside information could have pulled this off."

"Damn it, Nick, how could this have happened?"

"It's a long story," Nick sighed, anguish and frustration warring in his voice. "And even I don't know all of it yet. But, we can start piecing it together at my apartment. I don't want to go back to the station -- I don't know who we can trust."

"Let's go!"

* * * * *

He was aware at first only of the exquisite, throbbing pain in his head. Swimming up through layers of unconsciousness he wanted only to escape that continual onslaught. But the closer he approached consciousness, the more he felt a sense of foreboding of something vital left undone. It was finally that anxiety that drew him to complete, if not disoriented, awareness.

Groaning, he tried to make sense of the sounds that returning awareness brought him. Voices murmuring -- but sounding incredibly loud to his aching head. And then -- a voice close by, familiar and yet not.

"Natalie -- it's Schanke!" the familiar but foreign voice called. "He's stirring -- I think he's regaining consciousness."

Schanke? That's me, he thought. What the hell happened?

Footsteps echoed closer and a cool hand touched his head.

"Schanke! It's Natalie. Can you hear me? Come on, wake up, Don -- say something! Open your eyes."

He tried to ignore her, to sink down into that warm cocoon of darkness, but Natalie's persistent voice would not let him. After several moments, he realized that she was not going to shut up until he obeyed her. Summoning all his strength, Schanke blinked open his eyes. The light was dim but it still hurt. Groaning, he squeezed his eyes shut against it, but Natalie kept at him.

"Don! Come on, don't go to sleep again. Wake up and bitch at me. I'm going to keep pestering you till you do!"

"If I promise to bitch at you later, Nat, will you leave me alone?" he managed to choke out, hoarsely. He blinked and squinted his eyes open, trying to bring her blurred visage into focus.

"No promises!" she laughed, but Schanke could hear deep relief in the laughter.

"Where's the guy with the hockey stick that hit me?" he asked, trying to make the triple images of Natalie resolve into one.

"Just outside the door, I think," she replied, laughter dissolved in grimness.

That anxiety of something vital left undone hit Schanke again full force. He began to struggle to sit up. "What the hell happened, Nat?" he growled as he felt her push against him. "Let me up!"

"Schanke, stop it! If you sit up now you'll probably be sick. Tessa! Help me hold him."

Another equally strong pair of hands pushed him back on the pillow. Surprise aided them as Schanke focused groggily on Tessa Noël's face. "Don't I know you?"

"Yes -- we met over a dead body," she replied with grim humor.

"Morrison!" The name floated out of the blackness of his memory. "You... you and the boy ID'd him. And then... and then -- I can't remember."

"And then they shot you," Natalie supplied. "Two men in lab coats, remember? Luckily, they weren't there for the kill, but a 9mm slug grazing the skull affects even a thick-headed flat foot like you, Skank. So lie still and be glad you're alive!"

"Don't make it sound so lucky." Schanke groaned. "At least if I was dead, I wouldn't have this damn monster headache."

"Oh -- and not having a head is better?" she retorted. "Quit complaining and tell me how many fingers I'm holding up."

He squinted at her image and grunted, "Four".

Natalie glanced meaningfully at Tessa over those blurry fingers and replied, "Close". She brought the lamp closer. Schanke's eyes snapped shut against the brightness. Relentlessly, she pulled one eyelid open, then the other. He squinted his eyes shut again but realized the lamp had been placed back in its original position. He heard her sigh -- again with relief.

"Do you feel any numbness in your arms or legs or face, Schanke?" Natalie asked. "Can you move everything okay?"

He flexed his arms and legs briefly. "No problems. Now would you cut out the exam and tell me where the hell we are and why we're here?"

"My 'exam' shows you've gotten off with just a fairly significant concussion. So as long as you lie there quietly and listen, I'll tell you. Deal?"

"Okay -- okay! So give!" he begged.

"Those men took us all -- you, me, Tessa and Richie -- stuck us in a panel truck, drove us somewhere, got us out at the back entrance to what seems like a huge mansion and locked us in a storeroom."

"Where is Richie?"

"He's asleep... They knocked him around a couple of times."

"Any idea of our location?" Schanke asked, trying to think through the headache pain.

Natalie shook her head, and Tessa replied, "Not really. But we're out of the city. When we got out of the truck, they got us right inside but for that brief moment, I caught the scent of fresh air and growing plants, not car exhaust and garbage."

"Good -- that's something," Schanke replied. "How long was the drive?"

"Over an hour," Natalie answered thoughtfully. "At least, I'm fairly sure. We weren't exactly noticing the time."

Tessa spoke haltingly. "I suppose there's not much doubt as to who did this and why."

Schanke shook his head and was immediately sorry as dizziness struck him. "No," he replied, wincing. "Whoever whacked Morrison has taken us. The real question, though, is why didn't they just whack us, too? What's their take in leaving us alive?"

Natalie and Tessa glanced at each other then back to Schanke. "I can't think of anything -- at least, not until we know who has grabbed us, at least," replied the pathologist.

"Well, we can take a little comfort in that for now they want us alive." He then massaged his temples.

"Do you think that your Detective Knight can find us?" Tessa asked quietly.

"If anybody can, he will, Ms. Noël," Schanke answered. "I know Nick won't stop looking." He broke off, the swore, "Oh shit!"

"What?" both women exclaimed.

"Dammit -- he was right!" Schanke spat.

"Who -- about what?"

"Nick -- about this whole case," Schanke said impatiently. "Don't you see -- Morrison's death -- our kidnapping. These goons knew exactly when and where to hit both times. Nick realized it just after Morrison was taken, but I didn't want to believe it."

"What?!" Natalie cried, impatiently.

"That there's a dirty cop -- a high-ranking one -- selling us out to this organization -- or mastermind, or whatever."

The women stared at him, horrified. Natalie gasped. "Nick! These bastards are going to know everything he's doing!"

"No, I don't think so, Nat," Schanke said, musingly. "Remember -- Nick was suspicious from the first. Now, he knows so he'll keep his investigation out of HQ as much as he can. What about at the Coroner's office, Natalie? Any witnesses? Any way Nick could trace us?"

Natalie shook her head slowly. "I can't see how, Schank. That time on Saturday night there aren't many people around. Grace had probably finished in the other lab and gone home."

"Maybe, maybe not. With all the good police work I've taught him, Nick might find a way to trace us."

"And maybe he'll have help," Tessa murmured. Natalie glanced at her and smiled.

* * * * *

The elevator door rolled open and Nick and Duncan stepped into Nick's loft. As Nick began stripping off his coat and shoulder holster, Duncan glanced around briefly, his warrior's instincts marking exits, windows, floor plan.

His impatience and anxiety were difficult to contain, however, for he burst out, "Damn it, Nicholas -- what are we doing here? We've got to start looking for them!"

"Where would you suggest?" Nick challenged him, brusquely. "That's why we're here. They're running the tag number Grace gave us through Motor Vehicles. I'm going to call the station and check on it and see where we can go with that. And also," Nick then walked to the refrigerator, pulled it open, and grabbed a bottle. Taking a glass from the shelf he went on "I'm going to tell Stonetree about my suspicions." He poured the glass full and set the bottle on the table.

"I thought you said you couldn't trust anybody there," Duncan pointed out.

"Yeah, I did. But, I've got to trust Stonetree -- at least with some of this. I can't believe he could be their inside man. If he is..." Nick's jaw tightened. "If he is, he'll only know we're aware there's an inside man. But I can't believe Joe Stonetree would turn his coat for anyone. And if he's aware of our suspicions, he can help us by looking out for the informant."

Duncan shrugged. "It's your call. I doubt that you'd trust anyone that much without a damn good reason."

Nick nodded and tossed down the contents of the glass as he walked to the phone. Dialing quickly, he listened only a moment before getting a response.

"Norma? Hello. It's Nick Knight. Have you got the registration on the trace PC Shin called in earlier?... Damn it, Norma -- I need it now! Natalie and Schanke were kidnapped in that truck... Oh, hell, an out-of-province registration... how much longer will that take?... Great -- as fast as you can... No -- I'll call you... Fifteen minutes? Thanks, Norma... Bye!"

Nick replaced the receiver. "It'll be coming through soon." He walked back to the kitchen area where Duncan sat, one hip hitched on the dining table. He caught up the bottle he'd left there and glanced at Duncan. "While you're waiting, why don't you get something to eat and drink?"

"Ah..." Duncan's eyes moved to the thick, dark red fluid Nick was pouring into the wineglass. "What exactly did you have in mind for me to drink, Neacail?"

Nick frowned in puzzlement then followed Duncan's gaze to the blood brimming in his glass. He smiled sardonically. "Don't worry, Barbarian," he replied. "There's food here that's much more to your taste."

"That's good since I don't share yours."

Nick's smile twisted into a sneer at the disgust and relief in Duncan's face. "I know," he replied quietly.

"Damn, Nick, I'm sorry," MacLeod said quickly, remorseful of the self-loathing that haunted Nick's face.

Knight held up a hand. "Forget it."

Duncan sighed and nodded. He stood, walked to the refrigerator, and opened it.

Studying normal contents that obscured the bottles of blood in the back, he asked, "Why do you keep all of this here?"

Nick shrugged. "My partner is always hungry." A shadow flitted across his face. "Natalie said I was making him too suspicious, never having food around, so I started stocking up. What they don't eat, I give away."

"Natalie knows about you?" Duncan asked, startled.

Nick nodded. "We met several years ago when I woke up on her autopsy table." Duncan saw Nick's sneer finally fade.

"She must have been terrified."

"At first, but as soon as she was over the initial shock, she was intrigued and strangely unafraid. She seemed to believe from the first that my... metaphysical condition could be conquered medically... to believe that there was something left to save in me -- some remnant of light in the darkness. And now she's--"

Nick broke off and turned away suddenly. He walked to another cabinet and opened the door, revealing a large wine rack. He stood there for a long moment. "You want some wine with your meal?" he asked harshly, without turning.

Duncan saw that Nick had revealed a wound too tender to be touched, so he answered casually, "Sure."

"Red or white?"

"I think -- the white."

Nick grabbed a bottle, closed the cabinet, and returned it to the kitchen counted, his face grim. "Don't worry -- these are only wine," he said, gesturing with the bottle. "I keep it because it's the one thing I can tolerate to mix with the blood. It helps cover the taste of the sodium citrate."

"Sodium citrate?"

"An anticoagulant used in most stored blood, even animal blood, like this. Even kept cold, the blood would clot without it. Tastes bad, though. The wine helps cover it, dilutes the blood, and masks... the smell."

Duncan swallowed convulsively. A muscle jumped in Nick's cheek as he turned away.

To cover their mutual discomfort, Duncan said, lightly, "Ah, the problems of the modern-day vampire."

Nick laughed. It was the kind of laugh that substituted for tears, but Duncan felt some of the tension dissolve. Nick looked back at him, gratitude in his eyes. "Tell me about it," he replied. "Anyway -- eat, rest, and I'll finish those calls."

"Yeah -- thanks. And Nick--" Duncan caught Nick's arm. "I hope you and Natalie find your cure," he said, quietly intense. "I know how hard you've tried. It's still a bit hard for me to accept, even after our encounters over the years. I suppose, in some ways, I'm still a sixteenth century barbarian at heart."

Nick laughed, this time more believably. "Just like I've always told you." His smile faded but still warmed his eyes as he continued with equal intensity, "Thanks, Mac."

Duncan nodded. "Now -- make your calls. I'll find something to eat."

Nick nodded and caught up the portable phone. Punching the number quickly, Nick received an answer momentarily.

"Norma -- yeah, it's me. Anything?"

He listened for only a second before grabbing a pen and jotting something on a pad. Duncan forgot his wine, waiting to see what the call would bring.

"Right, got it. Now... could you pull up the vehicles stolen file and see if we get a match. Oh, already? Great work, Norma! One last request, please," Nick continued, glancing at the pad. "Would you access the city's mainframe and pull up everything you find related to this name? Yeah -- everything. Then download it here to me. Okay? Sure. The number is 555-4862. My modem will be on line in fifteen minutes. Norma, I owe you one! Now -- can you forget about my call and my number? Yeah, I know, but I

can't explain now. No... except for Stonetree. But I'm calling him now. Right. Cheers, Norma -- and thanks again."

Nick keyed the phone off then on again and punched another number. Glancing over at Duncan, he asked, "Does the name 'LLN Corporation' mean anything to you, Duncan?"

MacLeod shook his head. "Nothing, why?"

"The truck was registered to them -- and was reported as stolen early today." Nick's attention turned to the phone suddenly. "Captain?... This is Nick."

"Nick! Where the hell are you? All hell is breaking loose, Natalie and Schanke taken hostage, and I have no word from the officer first on the scene -- you! What is happening?"

"Hold it, Cap -- you'll get the report, don't worry. The important thing is -- I've got a lead and I'm following it up. But... it's going to take some time, so I may not be in for awhile."

"Nick -- what the hell--"

"Captain," Nick spoke deliberately. "You remember when I was in your office earlier tonight -- what we started to discuss?"

"Yeah, you said--"

"I remember," Nick said abruptly. "I believe if you consider the situation in the light of tonight's events you'll come to the same conclusion I did."

"Oh?" Stonetree replied. There was a pause.

Nick continued. "It... leads me to believe I would do better to stay out and follow up on this lead now. Coming in for my report might... decrease my chance of success."

Stonetree answered slowly and with significance, "I believe I understand. Nick -- Schanke, Natalie and the others -- any way to know if they're okay?"

Nick swallowed. "I have reason to believe Schanke was injured when they were kidnapped. How badly, I don't know. The others were okay, I think. Have you received any demands from the kidnappers yet?"

"Nothing," Stonetree replied. "Shall I let you know if I do?"

"I'll call you," Nick said.

"Be sure to call for back-up when you need it," Stonetree said, his tone implying other levels of meaning.

"Right, Captain -- I'll be in touch."

Nick keyed off the phone, then went immediately to his computer. As he started setting everything up and getting the modem ready, Duncan asked, "Do you think he got the idea?"

Nick nodded. "I only hope if anyone was listening, they didn't pick up on everything."

"One thing, Nick," Duncan said as he took fruit, bread and cheese from the refrigerator. "If that truck was stolen from LLN Corporation -- where's our lead?"

"If it really was stolen, we don't have a lot to go on," Nick stated as he worked. "On the other hand, one of the oldest tricks in the book is to report your vehicle stolen of you use it in a crime."

Duncan nodded, much struck. "So, hopefully, we can trace Tessa and the others through this LLN Corporation?"

"From your mouth to God's ears," Nick replied, distractedly, watching the computer screen.

"Amen," Duncan whispered fervently.

* * * * *

Natalie glared at the hard hand gripping Tessa's arm. Roger noticed the direction of her look and laughed. Deliberately jerking Tessa, he caused her to stumble down the hallway. Natalie grasped her other arm and steadied her as they came to a stop. Roger laughed again as he knocked on a heavy wooden door.

Hearing stumbling steps Natalie glanced back down the hallway. Ritchie supported Schanke, and both were being motivated by the gun in Thomas' hand. He gestured for her to turn back around. As she did she glanced at Richie's face and saw her own hate mirrored there.

Hearing a faint "Enter", Roger opened the door and pushed Tessa through. Then he looked at Natalie, smiled sarcastically and bowed dramatically as he held the door for her. Sweeping past him she shot him a look of pure loathing.

As she waited for the others to enter she scanned the room. They were in a library; dark, rich wood, crackling fire and shelves to the ceiling. A beautiful, warm room, until she saw the man seated behind the desk. Her initial reaction to him was of a deep and abiding coldness.

The hostages all stood at various attitudes of defiance, and she could feel the menace radiating from him as he watched them. Slowly, Natalie saw him smile. It didn't reassure her at all. "Please, do be seated," he said as he waved a hand toward the chairs.

Natalie glanced at Tessa, gave a small shrug at the guns at their backs, and sat in one of the chairs before the desk. Tessa hesitated, but as Richie helped Schanke to sit, she too settled on the edge of one of the chairs.

Standing the lone figure crossed to pour himself a brandy. Swirling the liquor, he turned back to face them. "I, of course, know all of you, but since you do not know who I am, I believe that an introduction is in order. I am Lucien LeNoir." He studied Tessa. "An old and dear friend of Duncan MacLeod's." As he returned to sit at the desk, Natalie shot Tessa a puzzled look and then remembered her comments in the truck.

"Oh yes, Duncan has mentioned you." Tessa's voice was calm and controlled.

"He has! Why, how delightful. And did he mention Melisande to you too?"

Tessa looked beyond Natalie to Richie. "No," she replied, turning back to him, "he has never said anything about her."

LeNoir's leather chair creaked as he sat back. "Non? I can't believe that he would mention me and not her."

"Duncan only said that you were... a very unpleasant person and that you were dead, he thought, a number of years ago."

Roger took a menacing step towards Tessa, but stopped at LeNoir's upraised hand and short laugh. "Ah, I can see why Duncan chose you." LeNoir leaned forward again. "Oh yes, Tessa, I am so glad to finally meet one of Duncan's women." A sneer crossed his handsome face. "*Bien sûr*, there have been many over the years."

"I know that it has been a long line -- but I'm at the end of it."

LeNoir slowly smiled. "Forever?"

"For all that will matter to me," Tessa said matter-of-factly.

"I assure you, you will be Duncan's last love. I do have so much to make Duncan pay for. You see, he killed my Melisande, and so I shall kill you."

"I don't think so, at least not without going through me first!" Richie grated out as he tried to stand, the last made impossible due to the fact that at his first word Thomas had clamped a hand to his shoulder and pointed his gun at Richie's head. Schanke also gripped his arm and whispered "Not yet, Richie!"

The man smiled at Richie, and Natalie knew he was enjoying the whole situation. She placed her hand on Richie's which gripped the chair arm. Looking at LeNoir, she asked "Why didn't you just kill us at the morgue then?"

"Why, that would have been too easy!" LeNoir laughed. "I want that Detective Knight of yours to slow his investigation, and I am using you to see that he's a good boy. And, Duncan has to have a very good reason to come looking for me. I can't think of a better reason than to save his beautiful woman and this delinquent he has taken in. Can you?"

LeNoir stood, then crossed around the desk to stand next to Tessa. He slowly lifted a hand to cup her chin and raise her face towards his. Caressingly he ran his thumb over the beginnings of a bruise on her cheek. "So, *ma chère*, how are they treating you? *Très bien*, I hope. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you, too soon."

Tessa jerked her chin free as Richie yelled, "Leave her alone!"

LeNoir turned towards him. "Ah, young hellion! Defending a lady's honor! *Mais, tu ne comprends pas encore*, you do not yet understand, my young fool, is that here I can do anything I want. Anything!" He casually backhanded Tessa across the face. She fell to the plush carpet with a faint cry.

Schanke gripped Richie even as he struggled to stand himself. Natalie's eyes were wide as she watched LeNoir return to his seat behind the desk. His faith in his minions' ability to control his 'guests' was absolute. She couldn't see how anyone could be so sure of himself and those under him. It was almost as if he didn't fear anything or anyone. Looking back toward Tessa, Natalie could see that the only thing holding Richie and Schanke back was the very steady focus of the gun in Roger's hand pointed directly at Tessa's head.

Tessa raised a hand to the blood flowing from her mouth. Looking over at the others she said "I'm all right. Richie, I'm okay." But the force of her accent belied the words.

LeNoir turned his head toward Richie and Schanke. "I believe that will be all for now, Roger. You may take them back. But, remember, I do not want them damaged too much. I may have a use for them later." He turned his gaze to Tessa as she struggled to stand. "Oh, yes, I may definitely have a use for her later." He laughed when Richie again strained against the hands holding him.

Natalie couldn't blame Richie, not even when Thomas had used his pistol against the back of Richie's head in order to get him out of the room. She couldn't blame him because she felt the exact same way. All she wanted was to drive that handsome face into the nearest brick wall.

* * * * *

"Anything yet?" Duncan asked Nick, pushing away the plate of food he had barely touched.

"No... wait -- yes, it's coming in now," Nick answered. "Norma's right on time with it."

"Nick -- what's our plan 'B'?" Duncan spoke slowly. "What do we do if, in all this information, we find no leads?"

"Pray that we do, Mac," Nick stated, grimly, "Pray that we do."

MacLeod felt his heart lurch and knew that Nick must be feeling a similar desperation. For them both with an attempt at humor, he quipped, "You know, Neacail, we've got to stop meeting like this."

Nick glanced over at Duncan and smiled, ghosts of memories shadowing his eyes. "I don't know about that, Mac... It seems we meet when one of us really needs the other's help. I know I've been glad of yours."

Duncan's desperation lightened somewhat as older memories flooded his eyes as well. With a slow smile of his own, he answered, "You know, you're right about that, Nick. You've shown up more than once in the last three centuries just in the 'nick' of time for me."

Nick groaned, "Spare me, Barbarian, please!" though his eyes never left the monitor. Duncan chuckled quietly. And listening to the quiet tapping of Nick's fingers on the keyboard, Duncan followed one of those memories down a corridor to the past...

The tapping of his boot heels was barely heard over the pealing of cloister bells ringing Lauds. Autumn leaves danced across the Quai de la Mégisserie before him, swept by the same bitter wind that billowed out his dark oilskin cloak. He reached the Well of the Samaritan and stood for long moments in its shadowed alcove, watching the moon-drenched expanse of the Pont Neuf for signs of ambush.

This close to his destination, Duncan MacLeod was permitting himself the luxury of hope. His long-sought goal lay just across this ancient "New " Bridge, which just kissed the point of the Ile de la Cité then continued over the further branch of the Seine to the Rive Gauche -- the Left Bank. There, close by the river, was the chapel of St. Julien-le-Pauvre.

Darius. And sanctuary.

At least, he prayed it would be. He had heard scraps of legend concerning this once-mighty warrior: an Immortal who had forsaken the power and promise of "the Game", taking the cowl to serve mortals rather than rule over them. It was said that Darius had assisted others to disappear from the endless hazards of the Game, and Duncan was weary and desperate enough to require that help now. Pursued off and on through the breadth of Europe, he had found to his dismay that his long sojourn in the Orient had caused him to lose track of other friends that might have sheltered him from the long reach of his enemy. With no other options, he had done his best to throw off his pursuers and head for Paris -- his last known location for Darius and the center of civilization in this year of Our Lord 1745.

His total attention was recalled to the bridge as a sumptuous coach with liveried footmen rumbled past his hiding place. Otherwise, the span was deserted. MacLeod stepped out of the shadows and onto the raised sidewalk of the Pont Neuf. He strode onto the raised walkway, paying little heed to either the silvered majesty of Notre Dame de Paris soaring from the island to his left or the usual sewer-like stench rising from the river below. His concentration was focused only upon getting across the open expanse as quickly as possible. He had seen no trace of pursuit since laying a false trail toward Lyon days ago, but he remained cautious after the chase he had endured.

The exigencies of that pursuit were evident as MacLeod hurried toward the left bank. His knee-high riding boots, silver tassels swinging with his long strides, were muddied, as were the wine-colored leather riding breeches. The travelling coat of rich burgundy velvet, though of exquisite cut and fit, was dusty and stained, and the figured brocade waistcoat beneath it unpressed. His cravat of fine white lawn was clean but hastily knotted, and the lace of his wristbands frayed. The biting wind off the river tore strands of long, black, unpowdered hair from the plum-colored riband that confined it at the nape of his neck beneath the silver-trimmed weather-stained tricorne. Though his physical appearance was, as ever, that of a man in his early thirties, tonight he felt every one of his 156 years.

He reached the Rive Gauche without difficulty and made his way through past the quays, flitting from shadow to shadow. After only a few minutes of walking, could MacLeod turn away from the River into the Maubert Quarters -- the narrow medieval streets of the ancient University section. Pleasant memories of his days there as student some sixty years ago flooded his mind, but he dismissed them as a distraction. Finally, with great relief, he saw the modest tower of St. Julien-le-Pauvre, rising just slightly above the trees of the park that bordered the churchyard. He turned into the narrow alley that led to the street which bore the church's name.

It was there he was attacked.

Three men stepped out onto the narrow street several hundred feet away. MacLeod stopped; they approached him slowly. When he turned and walked quickly towards the other end of the narrow street, a hunting horn sounded behind him and he heard the sound of running feet ahead, echoing off the high walls that bordered the alley.

As he drew his sword and searched fruitlessly for an escape route, Duncan knew his attackers had chosen their ambush site well. The buildings that bordered the alley were small shops and bakeries, all of them closed and locked for the night -- meaning no one to call to for help, no disturbed sleepers to bring the watch. He also realized these men were mortals, unbound by the Rule of Sanctuary on holy ground. Nor would men such as these have any moral scruples about violating the sanctity of the Church or its servants. MacLeod knew he could not bring such danger to anyone -- especially not to such a man of peace.

Suddenly, the closest of them were upon him, swords drawn. Duncan pivoted to have the high wall at his back and ripped his cloak off. One of the attackers lunged. MacLeod parried, enveloped the man's blade with his own, then threw his cloak over the man's head. Another lightning thrust with his sword and the man fell, before the others could react.

React they did, however, separating to come at him from opposite directions. Duncan countered by quickly carrying the attack to the man on his left. Another quick parry and lunge and the second mercenary fell, clutching his chest against the pulse of bright heart's-blood.

Duncan whirled as the third attacker's sword slashed toward his shoulder. He leapt back, catching the descending blade with his own and pushed it downwards, trapping the sword and the swordsman. MacLeod's left fist snapped upwards, smashing into the man's face with a crunch of splintering bone. He followed the motion of that upward thrust with a slash to the man's belly. The footpad's grunt of pain turned into a scream as scarlet blood and steaming entrails erupted from the lethal wounds.

As the wounded man fell, MacLeod danced back out of the slippery gore of the three bodies. He whirled to meet the onslaught of the reinforcements almost upon him from the other end of the street. The brilliant moonlight glittered on five swords as the men surrounded him. Duncan eyed them measuringly from his defensive crouch. They were obviously more cautious, seeing the demise of their fellows. Duncan was content to exploit their wary hesitation as he caught his breath.

One of the group suddenly growled instructions in a Hungarian dialect, "Attack together. Wound him until he falls, but do not touch his head. Remember Monseigneur's words."

"A strategist, eh?" Duncan called out gaily despite his panting. "Come to soften me up and take me back so your master can take ma head? Weel, I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod. Come try me, ye bloody bastards, and we shall see who of ye may go before me into hell!"

In the mêlée that followed, Duncan knew it would be only a matter of time before he fell. As soon as he engaged one attacker, the others would dart to any unprotected angle for a quick in-and-out lunge. In five minutes, he felt blood trickling down his right side, his back, and both arms. His hand on the grip of his sword was slippery with it. After ten minutes, his breath was wheezing like a bellows, his gait was staggering, and blood from a cut on his forehead was beginning to obscure his vision. His burgundy coat was rent into tatters and stained a deeper crimson from myriad small wounds. He was only kept on his feet by his Immortally-

enhanced reflexes and knowledge -- and his own two centuries of constant practice and fighting. But the pack sensed his weakening and began to press harder.

Duncan took advantage of one man's overconfidence and dealt him a quick slash to the sword arm, effectively removing him as a threat. But this small victory was bought dearly for as he leapt back, Duncan felt a burning pain rip across the back of his left thigh. He felt his leg buckle and knew as he fell that he had been hamstrung.

With cries of triumph, the pack closed in.

Suddenly, the moon's radiance was blotted out by shadow and a wind struck them all. Attackers and quarry all abruptly gazed upward. A dark shape the size of a man hurtled down upon them from above. The mercenaries fell over each other getting out of the way, but one of them was not fast enough. The shape coalesced into a man and, as his high-heeled black shoes met the paving stones with a jewelled flash, a nonchalant thrust of a tall be-ribboned walking cane knocked the footpad reeling. He struck the wall to land in a crumpled heap against it.

The other four mercenaries -- and MacLeod -- gazed open-mouthed at the apparition before them -- a tall vision dressed for the Court at Versailles. Foaming lace at his wrists flowed backwards as he brushed an imaginary speck from the heavy, back-turned cuff of his midnight-blue silk ball coat. Diamonds and silver lacing sparkled as he flung the dark sapphire cloak over his shoulder. The movement revealed the deep indigo and silver brocade of his waistcoat.

He swept off his silver-trimmed black tricorne and bowed with sardonic elegance. The braided queue which confined the length of his heavily powdered hair fell over his broad shoulder. As he rose, the focus of their stares, though, was the newcomer's face, strikingly pale even without heavy powder. Out of that coldly beautiful visage burned lambent golden eyes. Well-cut, painted lips parted in a feral snarl that displayed even, white teeth -- inset with a pair of cruel fangs.

"Alors, messieurs," the being greeted them pleasantly. "Est-ce que vous ne pensez pas qu'il est une belle nuit à mourir?" Then, in their own Hungarian dialect, he repeated, politely, "Do you not think it a beautiful night to die?"

Two of the attackers broke and ran off up the street with screams of terror. The other three, one of whom had issued the orders earlier, appeared shaken but stood their ground. The menacing stranger stepped between MacLeod and his attackers, pulling his small sword from its chased scabbard. He brought the blade up into an en garde position, and said, dangerously, polite, "Gentlemen -- shall we dance?"

With desperate intensity the three men attacked. The beautiful demon met and threw off their attack with a speed that was not human. The jewelled hilt of his sword caught the moonlight with a scintillence of unearthly brilliance. The being held off all three attackers with ease.

After several moments, the being cried gaily, "Merci, messieurs! The dance is over, but you, at least for bravery, deserve a clean death."

With speed too quick for Duncan's eyes to follow, he lashed out with a diamond-studded heel that struck one attacker in the chest with such force that his heart must have burst. Blood erupting from his mouth, the dying man fell, and the inhuman being used his momentum to sweep under another mercenary's sword arm, thrust that arm backward with a crack of breaking bone and simultaneously drive his sword through the man's eye socket into his brain. The victim's scream became a bubbling gurgle as the victor leaped neatly away from the fountain of blood and matter. The corpse dropped like a stone. The third attacker turned to run but was pierced through the throat by a thrust too quick for human sight. He fell, dying, clutching at his severed windpipe.

MacLeod had watched this scene unfold from the place he had fallen. Through a hazy calm of pain and total exhaustion, he now observed the apparition calmly bending to wipe his bloody sword on the clothes of one of the victims. Duncan was cloudily aware of danger, and so felt for the hilt of his sword, but was unable to summon the strength for fear.

Therefore, it was in a pleasant, mildly curious tone that he inquired of the being, "Would ye be savin' me for last, Sir Demon?"

The being so addressed stood up, looked at Duncan and laughed, which MacLeod took to be an encouraging sign. "In a matter of speaking, yes, but not for the reason you think."

He stepped closer and MacLeod frowned in concentration. "Do I know ye, Sir Demon?"

The dangerously beautiful creature replied in a drawl that MacLeod found more and more familiar. "You should know me though it has been some time since our last meeting." He bent to catch up the Scotsman's cloak where it had fallen. "I doubt you have other vampires in your debt, Duncan MacLeod."

"Nèacail? Nicholas?" cried Duncan. "St. Andrew shrive me but I am tha' glad to see you!"

"You should be," Nicholas replied drily as he stepped over the bodies to reach MacLeod. He knelt to examine the highlander's wounds, then covered him with the cloak. "Nothing here that will not keep -- especially in your case. Do I rightly suppose you do not desire the ruffians who fled to carry tales of you, Barbarian?"

"Exactly, mon vieux."

Nicholas' eyebrows climbed. "Ah, not so barbaric as when last we met, yes, MacLeod? Mais non -- that for later. Rest here for the nonce. I shall go deal straightly with the other pair."

"They're long gone--" MacLeod began.

Nicholas lifted a well-shaped hand. "Nay -- not from a hunter such as I, MacLeod. I can yet scent their fear -- and their blood. Abide here -- this hunt will not take long." He smiled hauntingly as his blue eyes began to glow gold. "As cowards, they deserve a death less clean, oui, mon ami?"

Duncan nodded hazily and Nicholas leaped into the air with a swirl of his dark cloak. But as the import of the vampire's words struck home, Duncan's eyes widened and he shivered. He almost called him back, knowing the other's keen ears would hear. However, remembering the atrocities committed in Bohemia by these men and others like them in the name of their master, he kept silent.

MacLeod lost track of time but it seemed only moments later that in a rush of wind, darkness again coalesced beside him and became Nicholas. MacLeod stared up at him, transfixed. If Nick had been beautiful before, now that beauty seemed magnified as though he were glowing with an unearthly luster. Duncan realized later that if Nick had wanted to take his blood or anything else, he would have given it willingly at that moment.

But the moment passed as Nicholas touched a handkerchief of fine lawn to his mouth and knelt beside him again. "They will make no report of you now, MacLeod. Bien sûr, now on to other matters. How long does your healing take?"

"Longer than we want to wait, I fear. Those bastards left their mark," MacLeod stated ruefully. He stifled a groan as Nicholas helped him sit up further. "But, Nick, the Watch will be along. We must go."

"Can you walk, then?"

"O' course -- a' least -- I must somehow." He struggled to rise, leaning heavily on a strength that seemed effortless.

"Not necessarily, but if it will help your pride, let us assay it," Nick replied, as he steadied the Scotsman to stand on his own. Immediately, the hamstrung leg buckled, Duncan started to fall and Nick caught him easily.

"I seem to have misjudged ma capabilities, Nick," he whispered dizzily.

"Nothing for it, then," Nicholas replied, and Duncan fancied he heard wicked laughter in his voice. "We must fly."

Duncan grabbed the vampire's shoulders. "Bloody hell!" he burst out, struggling weakly. "I'm no' a bird, ye damned Bodach! Put me down!"

"Nay -- we must go and quickly. Even in this deserted district someone may come soon." Chuckling, he continued, "Oh, and I think 'bat' would be a more appropriate analogy, MacLeod."

With that, Nicholas rose into the air, bearing his reluctant passenger skyward over the rooftops of Paris. And the rising breeze swept away the echo of curses in five languages...

"Damn!" Nick's soft cursing brought Duncan suddenly forward two hundred and fifty years.

"What's the matter?"

"Too much bloody useless information -- wait! This is interesting... The parent company of the LLN Corporation is Black Phoenix Enterprises. Let's see... other holdings include Signals Electronics, Bombay Imports, House of Melisande Fashions Inc."

"Stop -- go back," Duncan snapped, leaping up and striding to lean over Nick's shoulder. "House of what?"

"Melisande," Nick replied, pointing it out on the screen and glancing up at MacLeod in surprise.

"Black Phoenix... LLN... Melisande -- oh, shit, it can't be," Duncan whispered, staring at the screen as though he'd seen a ghost.

"Mac -- what the hell is wrong?" Nick demanded, alarmed by Duncan's words and his sudden bloodless pallor.

MacLeod stood up and turned away, deaf to Nick's voice, caught up in desperate thoughts. "Fitz said he was dead. He saw it happen. It can't be him, it can't--"

"Mac!" Nick rose and caught the Scotsman's arm with a strength that was startling. "What is it? Who are you talking about?"

Duncan's eyes flew to Nick's with pain and rage in their depths. "An Immortal -- a monster! -- I fought two and a half centuries ago. But I believed him rotting in hell these last two hundred years. Fitz... ah, another Immortal -- a friend... claimed to have witnessed his beheading during the Terror in 1790."

Nick shrugged, but his blue eyes studied Duncan's dark ones intently. "You know yourself how appearances can be deceiving. But what makes you think all those things connect to this Immortal?"

Duncan sighed and sat back on the arm of the sofa. "His name I first learned as Ludovic Lek Nociemny -- later I found out his real name was Lucien LeNoir. But he's also gone by Luciano LaNotte--"

"Always the same initials!" Nick broke in. "LLN -- LLN Enterprises!"

Duncan nodded. "He's one of the ancients, Nick, probably even older than you. He was of some ancient Frankish nobility... Their crest was a phoenix *sable* on a field *argent*..."

"A *black phoenix* on a silver field!" Nick supplied, his excitement growing along with his fear.

"I knew him to wear a heavy antique silver signet ring with an iridescent stone inset with a black phoenix. Nick--!" Duncan's eyes widened. "Tessa commented on the ring worn by the man who ordered Morrison's execution though she didn't see it well. LeNoir came to my mind but I dismissed the idea. I thought he was dead!"

"And 'Melisande'?"

"A woman... girl, really. One of the most beautiful I've ever seen." Duncan paused a moment, brown eyes wounded with the memories. He looked back at Nick. "Do you remember when you saved me and took me in... 1745, I think it was in Paris?"

"I remember. And Melisande was the one--"

Duncan nodded. "His ward -- his pawn at the heart of it all. She was the heiress he was using to consolidate his power base in that isolated region. In opening her eyes to his true evil I brought it all down around him. He was not exactly forgiving--" Duncan's voice hardened. "Of course, there was a hell of a lot I couldn't forgive -- of myself."

"You couldn't have predicted any of it, Mac," Nick urged quietly. "She made her own choice. You were trying to help her. Besides, she is at peace now. She escaped LeNoir on her own terms. It's for us to consider the living. And now we have a solid lead to them."

"A solid lead? Not hardly -- We've got a name out of the past. We don't know what name he's going by now or where to find him. Where the hell will we start?"

"With official channels, of course," Nick replied, waving toward the computer. "Motor Vehicle, voter's registration, other city and provincial records."

"And if he's no' there?" Duncan demanded. "LeNoir has no doubt carefully shielded his true identity everywhere."

"But he makes mistakes -- like those names that linked him to your memories. And--" a slow, wicked smile curved Nick's well-cut mouth -- "if official channels don't give us this LeNoir, LaNotte -- whatever -- what better place to look for a man of black evil and the night than a den of darkness and night crawlers?"

"I don't think I like the sound of that -- or that devilish excuse for a smile, Nicholas," Duncan answered with a thoughtful frown.

"Oh, you will -- for the most part. And you'll get to renew your acquaintance with an old -- uh -- friend," Nick replied, winningly. "Now get your coat... I can call Norma on the way."

Duncan grabbed his coat and shouldered into it, grumbling. "I'm not going to enjoy this, but *you* are. I can tell by that look on your face. It's the same look you wore a hundred and eighty years ago in Brighton when you told me the Prince Regent wanted my sincere opinion of that ghastly Pavilion of his--"

Nick pushed MacLeod, still muttering, into the elevator and the door rumbled shut behind them.

* * * * *

LeNoir watched critically as Roger crossed the library's plush carpeting and placed the brandy snifter on the desk before him. He negligently gestured his lieutenant towards a chair, then picked up the glass. Holding it in both hands he looked over the top. "You have a question, Roger?"

The lieutenant sat down, using the time to gather his thoughts. "Yes, Monseigneur. Well, I was wondering why we didn't just kill them when we had the chance. It seems too dangerous to hold them here."

LeNoir slowly lifted the glass to his lips and drank, his eyes never leaving Roger's. The man found himself hard put not to squirm in the chair. LeNoir gently placed the glass back on the desk, sat back and steepled his fingers together. "Yes, I can see how you could ask that. How long have you worked for me now, Roger?"

"About seven years, sir." His voice sounded worried.

"And in all that time, have I ever done *anything* without a plan or a reason?"

"No, Monseigneur."

"I do not have to explain myself to you." LeNoir stood and paced to the fireplace. "But," he continued as he turned to look at Roger, "you have been loyal, and even somewhat useful to me."

Roger visibly relaxed and drew in a deep breath. LeNoir was amused at the reaction as he relished the power he held over his minions. He crossed back to the desk. "Roger, they are, for now, a form of security. An 'ace'. Knight and, especially MacLeod, will not go after us for fear their friends might get 'hurt'." This last with a sardonic chuckle, and Roger joined in with his own laugh.

"Yes, as long as they are in our possessions, we have little to fear from Knight and MacLeod," he continued, sitting down. "It will take us some time to relocate our business dealings. Even with the plans we had in place, moving a 'business' this size will not be easy. Our 'guests' will see to it that we have that time."

"I see. But, I don't know," Roger shook his head. "It seems like it might make them try to stop us even more. I mean, they know we'll probably kill them anyway. Right?"

LeNoir laughed, "Nothing will stop Duncan, at least, not for long. But then, we have old, old unfinished business, he and I." This last was delivered in a lower voice.

Roger glanced up and, at the look on LeNoir's face, backed down again. "Sir? I thought this was just because those two saw Morrison die. I really don't understand."

Picking up his glass again, LeNoir said, "I know. That's why I have the power here. And, I always will." He laughed at the quizzical look his remark caused. "Go, bring the hostages to me."

"Yes, sir." Roger quickly left the room, almost as if glad to be sent away.

LeNoir sat for a moment, picked up his glass and lifted it as if in a toast. "To you, Duncan MacLeod! Fate may have brought us back together, but I shall certainly be the one to tear us apart! You took Melisande from me, and it shall please me to take *your* Tessa from you. No, MacLeod, you will not be the only one to pay my price." The drink was finished, and in the same move the glass was hurled at the fireplace. The sound of breaking glass was bittersweet in the stillness.

* * * * *

The bone deep vibration of the bass struck MacLeod as he followed Knight into the smokey dimness of the *Raven*. The driving, decadent techno-pop of the *Cure* seemed to voice an invitation into a world of darkness embodied by the club. That invitation was echoed in many of the glances he met. Those haunting eyes bore expressions from simple *ennui* to sinister lust, usually expressions with which he was familiar. What bothered him most seeing them in the eyes of predators focused on him.

Nick was well aware of these undercurrents. He pulled Duncan close and, with his lips inches from the Scotsman's ear, spoke loudly over the throbbing of the music, "You *do* know where you are?"

"Yeah, in the lion's den. You've done this to me before. Can't forget the feeling of being a menu item" Duncan's sardonic humor conjured a grin from Nick. "There *is* a good reason for us to be here?"

Nick's smile vanished. "Yeah... four of them." Duncan swallowed and nodded. Nick continued, "Remember -- stay with me constantly. Do not go off with someone else, no matter what."

"Don't worry. I'd as soon go off alone with a shark."

"Right." Nick turned and continued through the crowd. Duncan stuck close and did his best to ignore the atavistic urge to fight or flee. They made their way to a raised section in the back where the music

seemed marginally less loud. Passing through a row of hanging chains, Nick led Duncan to a table almost obscured in the dimness. As he caught up with Nick, MacLeod abruptly caught sight of the regally beautiful woman sitting as there as though enthroned and was startled to recognize her.

"Janette!"

"Duncan MacLeod! *C'est merveilleux! Bienvenu, mon bellot.*"

"*Merci, madame.* Your beauty only increases with the centuries." As he bowed to kiss her hand, Duncan sent a quick glare at Knight for the surprise. Nick only raised a wicked eyebrow and quirked a corner of his mouth. MacLeod's attention was recalled by Janette's rich, sultry alto.

"Ah, MacLeod, I remember why I like you so well," she purred, her indigo eyes catching his avidly. "So beautiful and so charming. And it is quite refreshing to see a human hold up so very well over the years."

Lost in those eyes, MacLeod was again transfixed by her compelling sexual magnetism. Forgetting Tessa, forgetting Richie, he bent closer, drawn inexorably by her seductive lips. Suddenly, a hand caught his shoulder, pulled him back and into a chair opposite her. The contact broken, he shook his head like a sleeper awakening.

Nick, his hand still clutching MacLeod's shoulder, smiled at Janette with a hint of steel. "I am sorry, *ma belle*, but he is still not for you." Releasing MacLeod's shoulder, he bent over Janette and met her lips in a passionately apologetic kiss. Pulling away, the vampire detective sat down between them, faintly smiling.

"You always spoil my fun, Nicholas." Janette pouted, reaching for the glass of red liquid before her. "I only wanted to greet an old and very dear friend in the appropriate way. It has, after all, been over two hundred and fifty years." Turning back to Duncan, she began charming the reluctant Scotsman. And Nick, watching her swirl the crimson contents of her wine glass, found his thought winging backward two-and-a-half centuries...

...to the crimson contents of a wine glass swirling in his hand. Nicholas de la Bonacieux gazed up from its bloody depths and across the table where Duncan MacLeod was completing his late repast. Flickering brandy-colored firelight painted the Scotsman's skin a warm honey-bronze, stitched a thread of gold to the edge of his full shirt-sleeve and glowed in the figured brocade of his open waistcoat. The illumination was just enough for the breakfast room, barely flirting with the rococo sideboard, the gilded frames of the paintings gracing three of the walls and the heavily chased mirror on the fourth. It flung capering shadows in the intricately carved moldings of the high ceiling and the corners of the small room, chosen by Nicholas as it better accommodated just the two of them. The amber luster winked off the cut crystal of the glasses and heavy silver candelabra before them, as well as the silver cutlery MacLeod was just putting down.

Touching his napkin to his mouth, the Scotsman then raised his glass toward his host. "My compliments to your chef. 'Tis a pity you canna' have the chance to appreciate his genius, Nick."

The vampire shrugged. "Ne faire rein. Most of us feel that our... sustenance excites the palate much more."

Duncan glanced uneasily toward the door. Nicholas noticed and shook his head. "Do not be concerned. Despite their curiosity about your unusual arrival, servants will not come near this room. I have given them leave to retire; they also know I have a certain... omniscience. It may cause gossip in their hall but their obedience is exacting."

Nicholas could see that MacLeod was intrigued despite himself. "Is it not difficult to disguise your true nature from them?"

Nicholas smiled ruefully. "In this time, less than most. After all, many of the haute ton sleep till afternoon, breakfast late, if at all, then attend balls, masques, and soirees that do not truly begin till ten of the clock and may continue till near dawn. Fashion assists us as well with powder and paint making all appear as pale as vampires. The servants think only that all members of 'the Quality' are strange and beyond understanding."

MacLeod nodded, then raised his glass to examine the play of light through the liquid therein. "A very tolerable claret, this, Nicholas."

"I had that laid down in 1701 in Calais. It has survived the move well, I believe." As Duncan drained the glass, Nicholas rose fluidly and stepped to the sideboard where bottles and decanters were placed incitingly. "Since we are alone, allow me to give you more to drink. Will you take more claret or some of the Bordieaux? Or would you care to assay the brandy?"

"The brandy, by your leave." As Nicholas brought the decanter and poured, he felt MacLeod studying him. The vampire said nothing, merely placing decanter and three enamelled snuff boxes at his guests' elbow. MacLeod nodded his thanks as Nicholas returned to his chair.

As the Scotsman warmed the liquid in the bowl of his glass, he looked up at Nick searchingly. "Why, Nea`cail?"

Nick met the look with memories filling his sapphire eyes. "'Why' what, Barbarian?"

"Why the rescue... the clothes, shelter, food... the honored guest treatment? How did you even know t' come to ma aid?"

"I did not realize, at first, who you were. I was out... shall we say, watching?... Yes, watching for some kind of untoward activity. Lately, I find amusement in hunting those who feel themselves the hunters, preying on the weaker and more vulnerable. I find it adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the chase if the predator suddenly realizes he is the prey."

Nick watched Duncan through hooded eyes as the Scotsman repressed a shiver. "I heard the sounds of the altercation from across the river. As I approached, I realized that one of the voices sounded familiar. When I... dropped in on you, everyone was looking up, and I recognized your face in the moonlight."

MacLeod nodded. "That answers the 'how'. And now what about the 'why'?"

"Why?" Nick leaned back in his high-backed chair negligently. His tone held a sardonic challenge as he went on. "Does it seem so strange to you that one of my kind could not understand the demands of honor?"

MacLeod's eyes held his firmly. "Understand it, maybe... but act on that understanding? Aye, Nick, tha' does seem strange."

"Perhaps." A twisted smile brushed Nick's lips, then fled. "Repayment, then, if you like. You saved me, not knowing what I was, but even when you learned my true nature, you stayed your hand. Your mercy puts me in your debt."

"I dinna think my 'mercy' was very willing at first, Nick," Duncan replied quietly. "You made me damned uncomfortable, as much for all you gave me to think about as for what you were."

Nick rose and walked to the fireplace, leaning his shoulder against the high mantel. He gazed into the fire silently for long moments, feeling dangerous heat on skin exposed by a discarded cravat, open shirt and unbuttoned waistcoat. A part of him wished that flame could still somehow warm as it had — how long ago?

"I had much to think on as well, MacLeod," he finally said, his eyes still on the fire. "Suffice it to say, I remember the time I spent with you as pleasant. You gave me shelter at a time I needed it, as well as... I will not say friendship, but a certain... understanding."

Nicholas looked up to see an easing of tension in MacLeod's eyes. The Scotsman nodded and spoke seriously, "I, too, felt that between us. I wasna sure, but I think I trust you, Nicholas de Brabran t — or, rather, Nicholas de la Bonacieux."

Nick, somewhat startled, bowed slightly. "Perhaps a not entirely wise thing for you to do, but still I thank you, Duncan MacLeod." He sauntered to the sideboard, where he refilled his glass from a dark bottle in the array. He sat down and gestured to Duncan.

"Have another brandy and tell me how you came to be in the... circumstances in which I found you earlier tonight."

Duncan complied with a small smile. "it is a long story, mon ami."

Nicholas waved nonchalantly. "We both have forever, after all. Besides which, I doubt it will be a dull tale."

Duncan sipped the brandy, his eyes on the candle flames. "No," he said, very quietly. "Tragedy is rarely dull. Still, I shall give you the shorter version."

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "I'd returned home after several decades travelling in the Orient. I'd heard rumors from merchants of the Rising in Scotland and went to stand wi' ma clan, despite the bloody foolishness of it."

"Foolish it was, indeed," Nicholas commented.

"Afterwards, I'd been forced to leave Scotland since I'd helped Bonnie Prince Charles. I was making ma way back towards the East..." Duncan's gaze faded to the recent past.

"I take it you encountered some obstacles on your journey."

MacLeod nodded. *"This damned Silesian war between Austria and Prussia had just begun. Tryin' to avoid the fighting and confusion, I travelled further south and ended up in the wilds of Bohemia in the worst winter in centuries, as well as in the middle of a conflict between the local barons and the provincial governor. This governor was originally appointed by Empress Maria Theresa as regent to the hereditary princess of the region whose parents had been killed when she was still a young child. This regency was a difficult compromise to prevent civil war in the area. However, with the Empress' attention occupied intensely with the war, the regent had leaped at an opportunity to assume power for himself."*

MacLeod sipped his brandy slowly, his dark eyes on the candle flames. After a moment, he continued. *"I became involved at the request of one of the barons, a mortal friend who had once helped me in a desperate situation. I also met the princess, and found that her guardian was keeping her ignorant of the true situation and using her very real affection for him for his own ends."*

"A not uncommon occurrence," Nicholas interjected. "And the guardian? Who was he, and what were his intentions?"

"His name was Ludovic Lek Nociemny, an Immortal and a powerful one, as I soon learned. He was very open with his intentions with me, thinking, as I gave him cause to believe, tha' I would help him in return for a share of the spoils. He planned to use his position and the opportunity created by the Silesian conflict to develop a power base to eventually conquer Europe. He had gained a following by his almost mystical charisma. He had the ability to entice people — good people — into his service, and make them believe what he was doing was right."

"He sounds like a formidable adversary. How were you able to stand against that kind of power?"

"I was still able to impress on my friend and his fellow barons just how dangerous Ludovic was."

"So how did you do it?" he asked curiously. "How could you without disclosing his Immortality?"

"I described to them his discussions with me, the plans he had shared, and through one of the baron's contacts at court, we were able to discover many discrepancies between the Empress' decrees and Ludovic's policies. The barons were convinced. We devised a revolt against him, enlisting the permission of the Empress, though she had no troops or other assistance available to send us. We also found ways to meet secretly with the Princess, to teach her the truth about Ludovic and the true state of her people. At first she did not believe us, but soon tha' changed. But by that time, we could not safely get her out of his hands. Ludovic had learned of the plot against him, and the fighting began in earnest."

MacLeod poured more brandy into his glass and stood, not altogether steadily, and walked to the fireplace. He gulped another drink, wincing as the fiery liquid burned its way to his stomach, then leaned his head against the carved mantelshelf. Nicholas watched the Scotsman for a moment, studying the sadness on the handsome features not quite screened by the fall of long, raven-black hair. Finally, the vampire spoke with something like gentleness in his tone, *"I take it the revolution was less than a success?"*

"No, the revolution itself was a success. Our forces, though often outnumbered, fought Ludovic's mercenaries for their own land and tha' gave them conviction. We were winning, despite all Ludovic could do."

Duncan sighed and stirred the edge of a burning log with the toe of his boot. *"Our failure came later, during the battle to take Ludovic in his castle. The fighting was going so well for us tha' he fled with his elite guard and the princess. A company of us left the fighting and gave chase. We soon caught them and I ended up facing off with Ludovic. He was a formidable swordsman, besting me at every turn, and was close to victory when we heard the princess shout for us to stop. We turned to see her with a pistol pressed to her heart. She was truly distraught — at Ludovic's betrayal, at the enormity of the warfare, at what she perceived as her own betrayal of her people, however innocent."*

Sipping from his glass, Duncan paused, his gaze pensive. *"Our battle seemed, I suppose, to symbolize it all for her — for she still cared for Ludovic but had also begun to care for me. I think in her distress and solitude, she had come to think that she was the cause of all the turmoil — tha' the only way to keep from being a pawn was to remove herself totally from the game. Before any of us could get to her, she pulled the trigger. I realized then that Ludovic had truly loved her well from his anguish over her death. In the confusion that followed, some of Ludovic's men spirited him away while the others kept us busy. We dinna have the heart to follow."*

Duncan turned toward Nick, his face in shadow but his eyes glistening with reflected light. *"There was a state funeral for the princess; my friend was chosen to be the new prince. He wanted me to stay, but I could no'. I left to return home and soon found Ludovic's men after me. I killed some, but more always*

followed. I soon found tha' my years away had caused me to lose touch with those who might have sheltered me. I was comin' to Paris to seek refuge but realized when I was attacked tha' I would only bring danger to one who did not deserve it. And tha' was where you came in, Nick."

Duncan returned to the table and sank into his chair. "I told you it was a tale of tragedy, Nick. The tragedy of needless loss and the tragedy of failure."

"The loss I perceive, but where is the failure?" Nick asked.

"I should ha' found a way to save her," MacLeod said, wretchedly.

"You did not fail her, MacLeod. She may not have acted wisely, but she saw what she perceived to be her only path to redemption, and she took it." Nick's gaze grew distant and his voice roughened. "I admire her courage."

After a moment, Nick felt MacLeod's eyes upon him, thoughtful and bemused. Before he could say the words Nick saw in his eyes, the vampire continued. "And now -- have you any plans?"

Duncan smiled grimly. "No, no' yet. Events ha' been movin' a wee bit fast for all tha'."

"You could stay here as long as you require," Nick offered quietly.

MacLeod paused in the act of pouring more brandy, staring at his host with his dark brows winging upward. You are the most surprising creature, Nick. Are you serious?"

"Bien sûr. Of course. I would not have offered otherwise."

MacLeod smiled, this time with more warmth. "Indeed, I thank you for your offer. You know I may bring trouble upon you."

Nick sneered. "Your pursuers tonight, those who lived to tell the tale, may prevent that. We shall not concern ourselves overly much." Nick's sneer faded and the intensity in his eyes captured MacLeod's. "But you must consider carefully if you chose to stay here. I shall endeavor to keep you safe, but you must be warned about the many dangers of this house."

At a sudden bustle and commotion in the hallway outside, Nick's eyebrows rose. "If I am not mistaken, these noises may herald the arrival of one of those dangers now."

The double doors flew open, and a vision in white silk and silver lace stormed into the room, ivory-hued skirts belling out over her tall, elaborately curled and powdered coiffure. She was an angelic snow-princess, but the only breath of color in her entire ensemble -- brilliant indigo eyes and scarlet lips -- expressed a totally un-angelic fury.

"Nicolàs! Imbécile! Salaud! Est-ce que tu as écovoyé ma servante, cette salope Marie, à se coucher? Tu es un grand coullion, toi!"

"Tiens, Janette, la boucle!" Nick broke into her tirade with an amused chuckle, but a hint of steel in his eyes. He glanced at MacLeod noting from his surprised amusement that he had understood at least a portion of Janette's extremely idiomatic diatribe. "We have a visitor, and I did not wish our conversation overheard, especially by servants."

As Nick gestured toward MacLeod, Janette turned to face him. Her eyes widened, but the look on her beautiful face sent a whisper of fear down Duncan's spine. "Ah, Nicolàs, your taste is improving!"

Nick caught her arm and pulled her back face to face. "Tu ne comprends pas, ma chère. That is not why he is here. You may not remember me telling you about the Scotsman that saved me from those Roundhead soldiers nearly a century ago. But this is he, Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod. Duncan, may I present Madame La Marquise Janette de Marivault de la Beaumont... at least, in this incarnation."

Duncan came forward and "made a leg", a very courtly bow, as he gingerly grasped and kissed her outstretched hand. "Your very obedient servant, Madame La Marquise."

Janette's eyes held his avidly. "Très beau, très magnifique! But how can this be, Nicholas? He is not one of us, and yet he helped you one hundred years ago? C'est impossible!"

"Not in his case, ma belle. What I did not tell you is that, though he is not like us, he is, let us say, much older than he looks."

"Immortal, but not as we are?" At Duncan's nod, Janette continued, gliding closer to the fascinated but wary Highlander. She stopped only inches away, gazing hypnotically up into his eyes, and slowly placed her hand on his folded arms. "Ah, Monsieur MacLeod, you are more and more intriguing," she breathed.

Nick saw Duncan's expression change from hesitant fascination to transfixed ensorcement as the Scot bent towards Janette's incitingly upturned face. Immediately, Nick leaped forward, caught her and pulled her away from MacLeod. Janette turned on him with a hiss and bared fangs, her eyes transmuted from blue to flaming gold. Nick allowed his own darkness free rein as he faced her.

"Arrête!" he commanded, fangs glistening. Catching Janette's arms, he shook her slightly, as his lambent eyes bored into hers. "You will stop, now, Janette! This one is not for you, comprends?"

"Qu'est-ce que tu fous?" she spat, breaking his hold with a strength almost equal to his own. "He must certainly have you bewitched, Nicholas."

Feeling MacLeod's startled eyes upon him, Nick spoke with a dangerous softness. "He is not here as either lover or prey! If you cannot understand that I owe him for protection, you have forgotten the Code."

Her eyes widened, then dropped. She turned away, hunching a sulky shoulder. "Very well, if that is how it is."

"Janette - your word on it," Nick insisted.

The beautiful vampire flounced to the fireplace. "Ah, d'accord, d'accord! Mais, è coutez, Nicolàs -- if our Père returns, I shall not support you in keeping your pet. Otherwise, I shall... restrain myself."

Nicholas relaxed, the burning saffron fading from his eyes. "Pas de problème. LaCroix will not return soon. He said Paris was again boring him and was off to Russia to seek... other amusements. Should he return, I fear little for MacLeod. His immortality may confer fewer strengths, but it also causes fewer weaknesses. Besides which, he is uncommonly good at taking the heads of his foes."

Janette looked at MacLeod with the dawning of respect in her eyes. "Oh, là là, Monsieur MacLeod, how I do regret my promise."

Duncan, tired of being talked about as though he were not present, took Janette's hand and kissed it with even more flourish. "Madame, if I understand it aright, I, too, regret your promise. I am fond of my life as it is -- but it would ha' been a glorious experiment."

Janette gazed at him speculatively, then glanced at Nick. The male vampire walked to the sideboard, poured a glass from his own bottle, then returned and handed it to her. "Perhaps another century," he said, consolingly.

Janette took the glass and toasted them both. "Perhaps," she replied with a seductive smile.

Duncan sighed and looked at Nick. "Are there worse dangers than the lure of Janette in your house?"

"Not at this time," Nick replied. "However, you should know that there are other vampires in Paris, and they do occasionally come here. They, too, will be warned against you, but you must be on your guard. How dangerous will it be for you to go into Society?"

Duncan shrugged, but looked uncomfortable. "Ludovic's arm is long, but I do no' think it reaches quite so high. You are quite fashionable, then?"

"Bien sur, monsieur... may I call you Duncan?" Janette asked. At Duncan's bow, she continued. "We are indeed très à la mode. Is it not delightful? Trust me, mon cher Duncan, you will make quite a stir in our circles. I cannot wait to show you off!"

"So, it is to be 'hide in plain sight', then, Janette?" Nick chuckled at the consternation on MacLeod's face.

"Ah, oui, but of course!" Janette insisted, tucking a small, but imperious hand into Duncan's folded arms. "you are much too pretty to leave at home. Duncan! I have a wonderful vision of you, in the most fashionable ball attire, la poudre, la rouge-- "

"Now, wait just a minute!" Duncan sputtered, shaking his head vigorously. "The MacLeods are warriors, my lady, no' a bunch of patched and painted macaronis-- "

"Naturellement, in the wilds of Scotland what else could you be, mon bellot?" Janette replied, sympathetically. "But you are in Paris now and one must dress, after all." She began leading her reluctant companion toward the door. "We must try several of Nicolas' ensembles and see what colors will suit you best. Puce, I think, and maroon-- "

"Lady Janette, I do not think it will be necessary for you to concern yourself!" Duncan's words fell upon deaf ears and his struggles were unavailing against Janette's vampire strength. He turned toward Nick pleadingly, as she pulled him out the door. "Nick -- you said you'd protect me...!"

Nick laughed as he rose to follow them. "I knew Janette would be a danger to you, Duncan, but I did not realize she would dress you to death."

"Damn you, Nicholas! Nick!"...

* * * * *

..."Nicholas... Nick -- you with us?"

Duncan's voice pulled Nick from his momentary remembrances. "Yes, I'm with you." Nick turned to the female vampire. "Janette, we've got trouble."

Janette's eyebrows lifted disdainfully. "I thought as much. You are wearing your 'cop' look. Why should I care about your cases, eh?"

"Perhaps you won't, but it's not just a case any more. Natalie, Schanke, and two close friends of Duncan's were kidnapped tonight." Nick briefly outlined what had happened.

Janette shrugged. "As for Natalie and Duncan's friends, *je regrette*. I'd just as soon see no more of your tiresome partner, Nicky."

"For my sake, then, Janette." Knight's eyes pleaded with hers.

"I do not see what I can do."

"Information, Janette, that's all I'm asking. As Master of the City, the Children bring you the whisperings of the street."

"You know very well they do. What do you want to know?"

Nick and Duncan exchanged glances. "Anything about this organization that might lead us to where Natalie and the others are being held. Anything related to Morrison's death or any whispers about a powerful, mysterious crime lord."

As Nick paused, Duncan continued. "We think the leader may be an Immortal, like me. Your... people may have heard of him somehow."

Janette looked at them thoughtfully. "Organized crime in this city wears many faces. The Mafia, the Tong families, gangs... we hear much of these, but I am not certain of this one of which you speak. *Maisé coutez*, Nicolàs, there have been rumors of traitors within your own ranks."

Nick caught his breath. "In the Metro Police? Damn, I knew it!"

"Bloody hell," Duncan swore. "Your instinct was right, Nick."

Nick leaned toward Janette urgently. "Anything on this bastard's identity?"

She shook her head, dark upswept curls catching glimmers of light with the movement. "No, *cheri*. But some have whispered that whoever he is, he is highly placed."

Nick nodded. "It fits. Anything else you can think of, Janette?"

As she shook her head, Nick grasped her hand. "*Merci, ma belle*. One more small thing?"

Janette sighed. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*"

"Will you listen for more? Perhaps -- if you see the chance -- ask around... see if any of the others may know more?"

"Ah, *oui*, for your sake, Nicolas, and for Duncan's, I will do it. Just keep your insufferable partner away from here, yes?"

Nick grinned. "To know him is to love him, Janette. Maybe I should bring him around more, not less." To forestall her indignant reply, he kissed her quickly, then rose.

Duncan stood and took the hand that Janette extended to him. "It is always... interesting to see you again, Janette. Thank you for your help." He kissed her cold hand.

"Perhaps one day we shall meet under different circumstances, *mon cher* Duncan." She raised one eyebrow in a manner that made Duncan distinctly uneasy.

Their goodbyes said, the two men turned to go. Shouldering through the painted, milling throng beside Nick, Duncan spoke easily over the relative quiet of the next song pouring out of the hidden speakers.

"You could have warned me, Nick. Every time I'm around that woman, I feel like I'm fourteen instead of four hundred -- horny and awkward with every gland in overdrive."

"She does tend to have that effect on people. Sorry, I just thought the surprise would take your mind off things for a while."

"Thanks -- I think."

As the doors of the *Raven* shut behind them, quiet descended abruptly, leaving only the throbbing of the bass and the omnipresent bustle of traffic and pedestrians a short block away on Yonge Street. Duncan asked, "Where to now, Nick?"

"There are a few snitches on the street we might be able to squeeze for something useful. Then it's back to the loft to see what we can dig up on four officers of the law."

Duncan's glance held compassion. "Four officers? Your captain as well?"

"I can't believe he could be the one, but I also can't afford to take chances," Nick replied, his voice tightly controlled.

Duncan was silent until they reached Nick's caddy and got in. As Nick started the car, Duncan spoke. "On our way, stop back by my place. I have a feeling I'm going to be needing my sword."

Nick glanced at him. "With any luck at all, you will be needing it. For LeNoir."

The Cadillac roared off down the street.

* * * * *

Don Schanke looked up at Natalie Lambert with abject pleading in his eyes. "Please, Nat, can't I sit up now?" he begged.

Natalie came back to the crate she had pulled up next to his cot earlier. Looking him over, she held up her hand, several fingers uplifted. "How many fingers now?"

"Three. I told you a while ago my vision is much clearer now. Come on, Nat. I'm goin' crazy lyin' here."

"Better you should go crazy then have brain damage. Your treatment at the hands of LeNoir's goons didn't help anything, you know, Don," Natalie answered, anger at their plight lacing her words. She examined him closely, then tested the responses of his pupils again. "All right. Just take it slow."

Natalie reached out and took his arm, pulling gently. Tessa stepped closer in case Schanke was too dizzy for Natalie to support alone. However, he managed to make it to a sitting position on the cot, back against the cold stone wall with no difficulty and only a few groans.

"Better?" Natalie asked, with a small smile, wondering where Don's injury ended and his penchant for theatrics began.

Schanke's eyes squinted shut and his teeth clenched. "Better is a relative term, Nat. It's a little better sitting up but still feels like a giant playing croquet with a sledgehammer inside my head."

"Well, believe it or not, if you can be upright without major dizziness or tossing your cookies after all the hits you've taken, you are better."

"Oh, joy." He opened his eyes slowly and studied first Natalie, then Tessa. "How are both of you? Those bastards were pretty rough on you, too."

Natalie glanced at Tessa with a lift of the eyebrow. Tessa shrugged, but her jaw tightened. Reading these signs, Natalie replied, "We've okay. Just a little bruised, but angry as hell."

The scrape of soft footsteps heralded Richie's arrival out of the gloom beyond the dim pool of light from the weak overhead bulb. He was now sporting the beginnings of a black eye and a swollen upper lip. He held a wet handkerchief in his hand.

"The guard let me go down the hall to a sink," he said, offering the cloth to Natalie. "I thought something cool and wet might help Detective Schanke's headache."

As Natalie smiled her thanks, Schanke replied, "Bless you, my son." She placed the wet, folded cloth over Don's eyes and he continued with a sigh, "Now, that's better!"

Richie pulled a battered crate up beside those upon which the two women were precariously seated. It creaked alarmingly as he gingerly sat, but held up beneath his weight. "I looked around as much as I could while I was out," he said. "Of course, we only went about three doors down, so I didn't see much. Mustn't have been anything important to see because the guard didn't put that damned blindfold back on. But this hallway goes on for about another forty feet in either direction from this room. On the right, in an intersecting corridor, you can see the foot of a staircase going up."

"How many guards?" Schanke wanted to know.

"Just two, both with AK-47's."

"Great. And the only possible weapon we have is the wood from these crates, and that's too rotten to do much good."

"Come on, Detective, I still think we can do it," Richie urged impatiently. "There are four of us after all. If we used some sort of trick--"

"If you know some sort of trick that will make us invulnerable to 9mm parabellum metal jacketed hollow points, we might stand a chance, kid. Otherwise, we're just asking to die."

"Damn it, we're gonna die anyway," Richie said, leaping up. "Might as well be with some chance of escape."

"Look, Richie, I'm not saying it's not worth considering," Schanke replied, groaning as he changed his position slightly against the hard stone. "But we need some time. We've got to observe their routine, think up a plan that has the best chance of success, and wait for the right moment."

"You've got to have a little more time to rest if you're going anywhere, Skank," Natalie added. "We can't do much if Don's out on his feet, Richie."

"They're right, Richie," Tessa stated gently. "None of us wants to sit around waiting to be killed, but we can't... what's the English phrase?... 'go off half-cocked' either."

Richie sighed and sat back down. "You're right, I guess. I just don't see how anybody's going to be able to find us, even Mac or Detective Knight. I think we need to make a plan and watch for our best chance."

"Agreed," Schanke said. "Something else to consider is that this LeNoir guy really seems to want us alive for now, at least till your friend MacLeod gets here. Hopefully, nobody will be shooting to kill -- that's in our favor." He looked at Tessa. "This bastard seems to have it in for MacLeod. What the hell did he do to cross the guy?"

Tessa and Richie exchanged surreptitious glances. "I'm not sure," Tessa answered slowly, after a moment. "Duncan's dealings with him, whatever they were, happened before either Richie or I knew him."

"Well, whatever it was, I hope to get the chance to shake your friend's hand. Whatever he did to piss off this SOB, LeNoir must've been a good thing."

Richie smiled grimly. "Maybe we'll have the chance to do the same. So -- we're agreed, then? We are going to look for a way to escape somehow?"

"Yeah, kid, we will. But nothing rash or impulsive. We take our time, if possible, make a plan and stick to it, right?"

Richie saluted. "Yes, sir, Detective."

Schanke's undoubtedly sarcastic reply was cut off by the scraping of a key in the lock of their door. A man entered, bearing a large tray of food. Behind him, the two guards stood motionless, guns trained on the prisoners.

"Chow time," the man with the tray stated. "Monseigneur wants to be sure his guests keep up their strength." He snickered.

"What a guy," Schanke enthused, sardonically. He looked innocently but meaningfully at the others. "I have a feeling we might just need our strength."

* * * * *

An ancient clock in Nick's loft was chiming half-past ten as Nick and Duncan entered from the elevator. Duncan pulled his scabbarded *katana* from the folds of his long duster and placed it gently on the table before pulling off the coat.

"But how are you going to get into the personnel files of these guys without authorization or a court order or something?" he asked, continuing the discussion they'd been having in the elevator. "Your friend Norma won't be willing or able to download those into your computer."

"That's why I'm not going to ask her," Nick replied, pulling his coat off and tossing it over a chair. He turned and grinned at Duncan. "I'm going to get Merlin to help me."

Duncan laughed. "I knew you were old, but he was even before your time. Unless you happen to have found his crystal cave."

"No, although he could be... none of us really knows. *He* is a wizard of sorts -- a computer wizard. He just happens to be a vampire, too."

"Interesting combination."

"It is for us. He helped me out of quite a jam not long ago, when the department computerized and they couldn't find any records on 'Nick Knight'."

Duncan looked impressed. "He must be quite a hacker. Maybe when this is over I could talk to him." A shadow passed over his face. "If there's any reason for me to want to continue in my present life."

"There will be, Duncan. We'll find them, I swear it to you," Nick's voice was determination itself, but his eyes as he met MacLeod's held the same fear. Nick's attention was caught, however, by the blinking light of the answering machine. He walked to the table and keyed the 'play' switch. After a moment of rewinding, a deep, suave voice spoke to them from the tape.

"Detective Knight, this is Lucien LeNoir." Duncan started and strode over to stand beside Nicholas. "We have not met but I understand we have a mutual friend from Scotland who may have spoken of me to you. This call is to let you know that I have those four... packages that I believe you may have mislaid. If you wish to retrieve them, I will be at St. Michael's Cathedral at midnight tonight. You and our friend may come together to discuss the particulars. The two of you come alone, and do not have clever ideas about ambush. I have men there already -- if you show up over ten minutes early, there will be no discussion and disagreeable things may happen to the merchandise -- over and above what damage may have occurred on pick-up. I do so look forward to our meeting. *Au revoir.*"

The tape ended and left the two listeners with pale, set faces. Duncan turned and began to pace. "Damn it, Nick, we've got to find them!" he burst out, his deep voice hoarse with pain. "Listen to the son of a bitch gloating -- God knows what he will do with them. He's playing with us!"

Nick was silent, frowning in deep thought. He looked up after a moment, his wounded eyes meeting Duncan's with dawning understanding. "Duncan, stop a minute and think about this. He called me but spoke of you as though he knew I know you... as though he knew we'd spoken about him with you and would be together to get this message."

Duncan turned and met Nick's eyes with an arrested expression in his own. "How did he know we know each other? How did he know I was connected with Richie and Tessa?"

It was Nick's turn to pace. "He's as good as telling us he's got a man on the inside and it's got to be someone that was in the station house tonight."

"Someone who saw us together," Duncan said, his mind racing. "But damn it, Nick, that could have been anybody. There must have been thirty or forty people there tonight."

"But there were only four people who knew the exact route that Morrison was being brought in on," Nick replied, with excitement. "Plus, they had to know the exact time that Schanke would have the others at the morgue. Put all three together and it leaves only Rouleau, Baker, Davenport... and Stonetree. One of them has got to be LeNoir's inside man."

"Why is he telling us all this, though, Nick?" Duncan asked, slowly. "Is he so well-insulated or powerful that he can hope to tell us this and still do business in this town?"

Nick thought for a moment, then looked back at Duncan. "His business, if you want to call it that, is international. His base of operations could be Lisbon or London or Rome as easily as Toronto. Maybe he's started relocating because of our investigation and he can afford to burn his bridges."

"Then we don't have much time," Duncan said. His voice was quiet but Nick could see that every muscle in his big, powerful body was tensed and screaming for some positive action. It was a feeling Nick understood well at the moment.

"I'll call Merlin now."

* * * * *

Tessa ran to the door of the storeroom and beat on the thick, heavy wood with her fists. "Help!" she shouted. "Please, open the door! You must help us!"

She continued shouting and striking the door only for a moment before the grating of the key in the lock could be heard by all inside. Tessa stepped back quickly as the door creaked open.

One of the guards stood in the doorway, weapon trained upon them. The other guard stood behind him, equally watchful.

"What's the problem, lady?"

"Please you must help!" Tessa implored, wringing her hands and approaching him hesitantly. "It's Detective Schanke. Dr. Lambert thinks he may be injured worse than we thought. Please. Help him."

The guard in front, a short but heavily muscled man with red hair, peered past Tessa to Natalie and Richie, who were bending over Schanke's still form. The young man watched while the honey-haired woman examined the detective with desperate intensity. "What's wrong with him, Doc?" the guard asked impatiently.

"How the hell am I supposed to know in this medieval dungeon without any instruments?" she snapped, pulling open Schanke's eyelids one at a time. "But my best guess is that our little dance with your Neanderthal friends upstairs -- added to the bullet wound -- has caused bleeding inside his brain. That bleeding caused increased intracranial pressure which could kill him fairly quickly if he isn't treated as soon as possible."

"Please -- you've got to tell Monsieur LeNoir!" Tessa begged. "He said he did not want us harmed." Before the guard could answer, Schanke's body stiffened, then began to convulse. "Oh, my God!" she screamed.

"Richie -- help me!" Natalie cried. "He's having a seizure!"

"What do I do?"

"Hold his legs -- just enough to keep him from hurting himself," she replied tersely. "I've got to keep his head back to keep his airway open!"

In the midst of Natalie's and Richie's shouted remarks and Tessa's loud crying, the red-haired guard, without taking his eyes off the scene before him, shouted over his shoulder to the taller man, "Cover me -- the man may need to know what's goin' down with this pig." He glanced over at Tessa and added, "And shut this crazy Frog bitch up, willya?" Tessa backed toward the edge of the open door, whimpering fearfully. The taller thug stepped just inside the room, glanced at Tessa contemptuously, then turned to watch the flailing prisoner curiously.

The shorter guard stepped cautiously up to the pair at the cop's bedside. "Get away from him!" he ordered. "Let me look at him."

"Are you nuts?" Natalie shouted, breathlessly, holding Schanke's head with all her might as his body heaved and bucked against her. "If I let go, his tongue could go back in his throat and block his breathing!"

Richie snapped, "He could fall onto this concrete floor if we let him go!"

"If you want me to do anything for him, you get back, dickhead!" the guard barked.

Richie flushed angrily, but only looked at Natalie for direction. "All right, but make it quick! Let him go, Richie."

Natalie and Richie stepped back and the guard came closer, watching warily as Schanke's body shook the cot with the force of the movements. The guard glanced at the prisoners near him, seeing their attention focused solely on the thrashing body of their fellow. The redhead turned back to observe the afflicted man and at that moment his motions ceased. The detective fell back to the bed bonelessly.

The guard bent closer. "I don't think he's breathin'-- "

The inert body suddenly sat up. Schanke slammed his head into the guard's solar plexus. The redhead staggered backward, wheezing for breath, trying to pull his gun around for a clear shot. Natalie caught up a metal-ribbed board hidden behind Schanke and smashed it into the guard's head as though trying for a home run. Splinters flew from the plank, but the guard fell. Richie leaped forward, kicked him, and the man was down for the count.

Just as Schanke had ploughed into the redhead, Tessa, dropping the faked hysterics, threw her shoulder into the heavy door and slammed the taller guard backward with it, crushing him into the doorframe with one arm and the gun pinned on the outside.

As the man screamed with pain and fury, Natalie ran back to add her weight to Tessa's to hold against his struggles. He pushed against them powerfully.

"Richie!" Tessa shouted.

Richie whirled from the roundhouse kick he'd just delivered and swept up another board from hiding. He dashed to the door and whacked the pinned man in the face with it. The guard's head lolled back dizzily.

"Ease back a bit," Richie panted to the women. When they obeyed, he reached out and grabbed the machine pistol from the man and clouted him in the head. As Natalie and Tessa let the door swing inward, the thug oozed down the doorframe and collapsed on the floor. The three victors looked at each other panting and laughed, albeit a little hysterically.

"Not bad, for amateurs." Natalie, Tessa and Richie turned back to see Schanke regarding them from the floor beside the cot. "Now come help me up and maybe we can blow this joint." The women went back to assist the cop to stand. Though he had to lean heavily on them, Schanke made it to where Richie stood watching the hallway.

"Can you do it, Detective?" Richie asked tersely.

"To get out of here I'd crawl if I had to," Schanke replied. "Let's go."

The group crept warily towards the stair Richie had noticed earlier, the women supporting Schanke and Richie leading the way watchfully with the guns. They crept down the hall as quietly as possible and came to the intersecting hall that held the stair. Richie peered into the corridor quickly at first, then when there was no danger, he looked more carefully. The staircase went up eight steps to a landing, then must have continued upward at a ninety degree angle, but that course was hidden by a wall.

"Looks like the coast is clear," he whispered. "I'll go up first -- you guys follow me a little way back. When I get to the landing and the stairs turn, be ready to run back the other way."

The women nodded, their faces pale but determined. Schanke said nothing. Sick and dizzy, it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

Richie started up the steps, with the other three following several steps behind. He cautiously crept up to the step just below the landing, then turned the corner quickly, the machine pistol held in front of him.

LeNoir's lieutenant, Roger, stood there with two other men, guns trained on him.

"Natalie, Tessa -- go back!" he shouted. The two women obeyed without question, turning Schanke hurriedly on the stairs and starting back down. Richie raised the guns, prepared to buy their safety at any cost.

Roger said, pleasantly, "Now, kid, don't push your luck. There's no percentage in it. Your friends aren't going to get anywhere."

Richie glanced down to see that the others had stopped at the foot of the stairs facing men who had come down the intersecting hallway.

There was no chance Richie could find -- they were covered too well. And because of the turn of the stairs, the two groups of LeNoir's men wouldn't even be in each other's crossfire.

Slowly, he put down the weapons, and raised his hands. Roger gestured to one of his guards to retrieve them. He smiled at Richie silkily, his handsome face alight but his cruel eyes hard. "Not bad, junior. Must've been some plan, to overcome two guys with these," he said, hefting his own AK-47. "Monseigneur may even applaud you. He likes initiative."

Without warning he struck Richie across the face with the gun butt. Richie fell backward, just barely saving himself from falling down the lower steps by grabbing for the railing. Natalie gasped. Tessa cried out and ran up the stairs to support him. Blood poured from the young man's nose.

Roger watched them, still smiling. "I, on the other hand, deplore initiative, especially in a... guest. Such bad manners."

Tessa, holding the barely conscious Richie, spat, "*Espèce de fumier! Arrête!*"

Roger shook his head, sorrowfully. "And I thought the French were so unfailingly polite." He stepped down the stairs, passing them. "Bring them," he ordered the men behind them. "Too bad about your timing. If we had'nt been on our way to get the lovely Doctor here, no telling how far you may have gotten." He reached out and grabbed Natalie's arm brutally, jerking her toward him. Roger then signalled his men to catch Schanke as the cop lunged after her, fire in his eyes.

"Where are you taking her?" Schanke demanded, though he was reeling dizzily from the effects of his wounds and the guard's rough handling.

"Oh, she's so pretty. we're going to show her off -- to your friends. Monseigneur's invited them to see her at a little... meeting." He motioned to the other men. "Put these three back in the storeroom under double guard. If they make any trouble at all -- shoot them."

* * * * *

Nick put down the phone. "Well?" MacLeod asked. "Can Merlin help?"

"He says anything is possible, given time."

"Did you tell him that time is what we don't have?" MacLeod burst out. "I thought this computer wizard had hacked into your police computer system once already. How long can it take?"

"Mac, you know computers well enough to know that a guarded system like the Metro police has passwords and failsafes that are changed routinely. Yes, he knows the system a little better for having broken into it once, but he's got to find the keys all over again."

"Did he give you some kind of time frame?"

Nick looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. "I told him we had an hour before the meet. He's going to try to hack in and access the information. Then he'll call us if he finds anything."

"Shit," Duncan whispered. "I hate the feeling of doing nothing when anything could be happening to Tessa -- to Richie. I feel so goddamned helpless."

Nick stepped closer and put a hand on Duncan's shoulder. "I know, I feel that way, too. But Merlin's doing his best for us. Besides, LeNoir's got no reason to kill them -- not yet, anyway -- and every reason to keep them alive. We've got to stay focused on that."

Before MacLeod could respond, the telephone shrilled. Nick strode to the table and picked up the receiver. "This is Knight."

"Oh, Nick I'm so glad I caught you! I've been trying at the station for the last two hours."

"Myra," Nick acknowledged, and swallowed convulsively. Duncan, watching him, would have thought that the vampire's face could not become more pale, but saw it happen. The detective cupped his hand over the phone briefly and whispered to MacLeod, "Schanke's wife."

He removed his hand and said, quietly, "Myra, I'm here."

"Nick, I'm sorry to bother you, but... but I just had to know. Have you found out any more about Don?"

Nick replied, gently, "Nothing definite, Myra, but we've got some very promising leads. That's why I haven't been at the station; I've been out, starting to follow them up."

"That's what I thought, Nick, and it's what has kept me together," she replied with a thread of a break in her voice that caused something to tighten in Nick's chest. "You know, it's the nightmare of every cop's wife, getting the call that says something like this has happened. Captain Stonetree was wonderful, don't get me wrong, but there's no good way to be told your husband has been taken hostage by some unknown criminal. But I knew... I knew even without the Captain's reassurances that you were out there trying to find him."

"I am, Myra... I am," Nick said, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the phone like a drowning man. "I promise you... I will not rest until I find them."

There was a soft sound like a swallowed sob that ripped at Nick's heart -- at least, in the spot where he remembered his heart had once beat. He closed his eyes but Duncan saw blood-tinged tears leak out from beneath his thick lashes.

A deep breath and Myra whispered, "I know that, Nick, and I can't tell you how much it comforts me to know you're on this." After a slight pause she continued, more strongly, "I know Don can't be the easiest person to be partnered with. God knows he's not the easiest man to be married to. But Nick... he comes home and he tells me about the things you talk about, the things you share. He laughs about your differences but he also talks about things you've taught him... things he's taught you. Thanks for giving him that caring, Nick -- for giving it to us both. Whatever happens, he -- and I -- will know you'll have done everything possible for him."

Nick's jaw muscles bunched hard. He started to speak, cleared his throat, then tried again. "He would be doing it for me... he has done it for me. He's no quitter either, Myra, remember that. If there's any way to get out, Schanke will find it. I'll probably get there and find that he's got it all wrapped up."

She laughed, a watery laugh but a real one. "He's a survivor, my Don."

Nick's eyes opened, smudged with crimson-colored tears. He took a deep breath. "How's Jenny?"

"She doesn't know yet. I sent her off to spend the night with a friend. I can't... I won't tell her anything until I know for sure."

Nick nodded, absurdly, then realized she could not see him. "That's good."

"I know I'm keeping you from the search, Nick, I'm sorry, I'll go now. I just had to speak to you, to hear your voice."

"I know... I understand. Will you be all right?"

"Yes -- don't worry about me. Just find Don for me, okay, Nick?" she whispered. "He's got this funny notion that you can do almost anything... and I've come to believe it, too. Just find him, please."

Nick smiled despite the liquid scarlet obscuring his vision. "I will, Myra. Thanks for the belief. I'll bring him back to you."

"I know. See you then."

The line went dead. Nick keyed the phone off, pushed down the antenna and dropped it on the couch. He walked to the window and stood looking out on darkness. MacLeod stepped up behind him, put his hand on Nick's shoulder, but found no words.

Nick turned and Duncan winced at his bone-white face. He had seen men dying from fatal wounds with just that look on their faces. It did not help that he, MacLeod, was suffering from the same pain.

"We will find them, Nick." Word had come but they hung on the air and neither knew if they were a promise or a plea.

* * * * *

The sea-green Caddy purred down Bloor Street. Inside, a tense silence had persisted since the occupants had entered. Nick Knight shifted position, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel. Duncan MacLeod glanced across the seat and studied Nick's profile, lit softly by the greenish glow of the dashboard lights.

"What's worrying you the most?" he asked the vampire.

Nick threw Duncan a startled glance, so immersed in his own dark thoughts he had almost forgotten the presence of the other. His face turned back to the street and a hint of pathos touched his face.

"I should be most worried about whether Schanke is alive or dead, about what they might've done to Natalie, about Richie and Tessa. But right now, all I can think about is that we're meeting LeNoir in St. Michael's Cathedral."

Duncan looked puzzled for a moment, then concerned. "Oh, my God, I forgot. Holy water, crucifixes, statues of saints... Nick, how dangerous is this for you?"

"Bad enough. I've tried to adjust myself to crosses, so for a brief moment I can stand to touch them, but they still burn. Holy water is... is like acid to me," Nick paused, jaw muscles bunching. "Everything you mentioned... and more. For a vampire, just the atmosphere itself is painful and debilitating. Even here in the New World, a major cathedral like this one embodies the very essence of sacredness. And despite my 'climb back toward the light' as you call it. I'm still profane, so it's still anathema to me." Nick paused, a flash of memory recalling the difficulties of the stakeout of St. John's.

Nick's voice became deeper and quieter. "The worst of it's that in a church such as this I feel the weight of my damnation most of all," he whispered wretchedly. "The Catholic church was once my life... and now all of her symbols burn me like flame. I am excommunicant and damned by the Faith that was once all to me."

Duncan watched the road with eyes that saw glimpses of his own ancient pain. "So was I, Nick, but by my own choice. When the only father I'd ever know threw me out in horror at my return from the dead, and called the spawn of the devil, I lost that heritage of Faith as well. When Connor found me and taught me, as he'd been taught, that we Immortals had no notion of our origin and didn't know if we even had souls, I left the Church for a very long time, feeling much the same weight of shame, but a lot of anger, too. I think I've told you before how Darius brought me back and taught me that redemption is possible for us as well. If he was still alive, I know he would tell you the same."

Nick turned a corner and the lighted, soaring spires of St. Michael's came into view down the street. He glanced at MacLeod with a brief smile of thanks. "I wish I could have met him." The smile fled as he continued. "But we've still got to get through tonight. You're sure that even a villain like LeNoir will honor this Rule of Sanctuary?"

"I've known some even worse in some ways than LeNoir... crazier, more violent, but they all honored Sanctuary on holy ground. We don't know the source, but all Immortals know should any violate the Rules, the others will immediately hunt them down for the slaughter."

Nick nodded. "Your version of our Enforcers. Good enough."

He pulled up and parked as the church bells of the city, most of them mechanized, began to chime midnight. The clear tones of Michael's above them started with the Westminster chimes. A thousand memories struck both men but remained unspoken between them as they exited the car. The carillon ceased and a lone, deep-throated bell began to toll the hour. They crossed the paved courtyard and climbed the steps. At the chime of ten they exchanged a quick glance at the entrance. At the chime of twelve they pulled open the massive doors and entered the cold dimness of the narthex. They walked slowly across the marble floor, past memorials to communicants dead in two wars, and came to the high-arched entrance into the nave, carved with jamb statues.

Duncan's gaze was drawn upward along the masses of columns that soared to a dim and distant ceiling which was possibly laced with fan vaulting, hard to make out in the muted light. Votive candles lined a wall beside them, leading into a smaller chapel. There were sconces in the chancel, but inside this cavernous space these provided only tiny islands of illumination. Hearing Nick catch his breath, Duncan glanced at him.

Nicholas stood staring at the holy expanse before him, with eyes that were at the same time hungry and sickened. Duncan wasn't sure if it was the light or the effect of the atmosphere on him, but Nick's eyes looked bruised, dark circles beneath them. His face was hollowed, waxy and ill, and his breathing seemed labored.

"Can you make it?" MacLeod asked, his voice sibilant against the immense tract of stone.

"I will," Nick replied, determinedly, but swallowing as though against nausea. They began to walk slowly down the center aisle, their footsteps echoing only lightly in the vastness. Both of them studied the darkness around them carefully, but Duncan also kept an eye on Nick and his reactions. They had traversed about half the nave when an opening off to the left led into the Lady chapel, with a statue of the Blessed Virgin before it. Duncan saw Nick stare at the image longingly, but also grimace as though the sight gave him pain. The vampire continued to move well enough, so MacLeod said nothing.

As they approached the transepts, there was movement in the choir high in the chancel. Nick noticed it first, caught Duncan's arm and gestured. They continued walking more slowly and moments later could see several figures standing in the chancel.

"It's Natalie," Nick whispered. "They've brought Natalie."

Nick and Duncan crossed the wide transepts and noted other men coming out of the darkness from both directions to meet behind them and block the exits. The men made no move to stop them, however, as they strode to meet the tall haughty figure that awaited them on the steps. As they got closer, LeNoir called out, pleasantly, "Gentlemen, I am so pleased you accepted my invitation to this little *tête-à-tête*. Thomas, Andre -- do welcome the gentlemen properly."

Duncan and Nick was stopped at the foot of the chancel steps by two more men bracketing LeNoir, who descended the steps to search them. As this ritual was completed and Nick's gun removed, the vampire looked up at Natalie. She stood next to an armed guard in the top row of the choir. Her stance was proud and defiant, but as her eyes met his, Nick could sense her fear and anger as well as her pride and courage calling out to him. He could also see bruises on her left cheekbone and her right wrist. He fought the wave of rage that rose in him at that sight and sent her a smile of comfort and promise. He turned his attention back to LeNoir as MacLeod spoke.

"Cut the bullshit, LeNoir," Duncan replied stonily. "What do you want from us to get our friends back?"

As LeNoir's guards stepped back to their flanking positions, he said, reprovingly, "Ah, MacLeod, MacLeod, the courtesies, the courtesies! Surely you have lived long enough now to acquire some polish, some hint of polite civilization?"

"Surely, but I will no' waste it on you," Duncan shot back. "Now tell us what we want to know!"

"Do not be so very hasty, MacLeod. You have not yet introduced me to your friend."

"I'm sure you know very well that this is Nick Knight, the cop assigned to investigate the death of a man named Morrison. You knew enough about him to take his friends hostage, too."

"Such hard words, MacLeod! Say rather I... strongly urged them to partake of my hospitality." LeNoir turned to study Knight. "I've already come to appreciate your abilities, Detective Knight. I am intrigued, however. I have the sense that you may share some attributes with Mr. MacLeod and myself. Is that so?"

Nick glanced at Thomas and Andre, close enough to intervene if necessary, but far enough away not to easily overhear. "Perhaps... but that has little to do with our purpose here. We want them back," he said, with cold and absolute determination, gesturing toward Natalie with a nod of his head. "The question is what hoops you make us jump through to get them."

LeNoir smiled. "Cleverly spoken, Detective. For now I will choose to allow myself to be diverted. As to what would induce me to give up the pleasure of their company, it is very simple: I simply desire you to... ah... delay the progress of your investigation into Alec Morrison's death--"

"You mean his execution," Nick interjected.

"Ah, Detective Knight, you are too severe. You must not allow Mr. MacLeod's deplorable manners to be your guide." LeNoir's suave smile was in direct contrast to the predatory coldness of his eyes. Nick's eyes locked with those eyes, blue on blue, till Nick felt his own growing hotter and hotter. To forestall the Change he felt coming, he broke the gaze and spoke with dripping sarcasm.

"MacLeod's manners suit the situation. But pray, go on with your terms."

LeNoir's jaw hardened but he replied smoothly. "Certainly, Detective. It is, after all, why I asked you here." LeNoir walked down the steps to come face to face with Duncan. LeNoir was perhaps two or three inches taller than the highlander, but Nick noticed no other difference between the power or presence of the two Immortals. Without taking his eyes from MacLeod's, he continued, "Has Monsieur MacLeod told you of the circumstances of our last meeting?"

"Yes, a long time ago."

"Then you know he killed my Melisande." Centuries of pain echoed in LeNoir's voice.

"I know that Melisande died." Nick's reply was quiet in response to that anguish. "It was a tragedy, but it is my understanding that she took her own life."

"*Mais non*, Detective. Oh, it might have been Melisande's hand that struck the blow, but it was MacLeod who was responsible. He and those others who took away her innocence, who poisoned her against me. He was responsible for her confusion, her despair. I loved her, nurtured her, guided her--"

"Manipulated her, isolated her from her people, and kept her naive as long as possible to try to grab power for yourself!" Duncan interrupted with fire in his eyes and voice. "Yes, she was confused and despairing, but it was because of your betrayal!"

LeNoir's suave calm became icy, his cold blue eyes spearing Duncan's. "Rankin!" he called, his voice iron-hard. "Do bring our lovely guest a bit closer."

Rankin grabbed Natalie's arm and pushed her roughly down the steps to the front of the choir box. Nick stirred at that, and Duncan thought he heard a low growl begin deep in his friend's throat. MacLeod caught Nick's arm and, with a quick shake of his head, recalled the other man's precarious control. Rankin pushed Natalie in front of the altar and stopped her there.

"Go ahead. Detective; speak to her," LeNoir commanded.

Nick looked past LeNoir. He tried to focus on Natalie's face and to ignore the impact of the altar behind her, which even at that distance gave him pain. "Natalie, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Nick -- except for being furious."

"Good. Nat, is Schanke... is he--"

"He's okay; he's got a concussion which is giving him a headache and double vision, but otherwise he's fine." Some of the tension melted from Nick's shoulders at her words.

"And Tessa and Richie?" MacLeod asked.

Natalie smiled. "You must be Duncan." At his nod, she continued, "Don't worry; they're fine."

The smile faded from Natalie's face as she glanced at LeNoir. Suddenly, she cried rapidly, "Don't come after us! He wants Duncan for revenge -- don't--!" Her words ended in a cry of pain: Rankin slapped her across the face with the back of his hand.

With a roar of rage, Nick Changed. With burning eyes and distended fangs, he tossed LeNoir aside and flung Thomas and Andre down the steps. Chaos erupted as LeNoir and the two guards fell to the stone floor with cries of shock and pain.

"Nick -- NO!" Duncan shouted. "Not now -- not here!" The men around him reacted variously -- some of them fell back in fear, but most closed in around him, weapons drawn.

Too fast for the mortal eye, Nick soared up to the chancel, landed in front of Rankin and struck him a blow that sent him reeling backward. He crashed into the carved wooden choir screen and sank to the floor bonelessly.

Despite his surprise at Nick's actions, LeNoir was not slow to adapt to a changing reality. He leapt up as Nick attacked Rankin and shouted to the men near Duncan, "Get holy water!"

Duncan shouted, "No!" and struggled to stop the man running to the font to obey, but there were too many guards around him. Several pinned his arms behind his back and another held a sword to his throat.

LeNoir, meanwhile, ran to one side of the chancel and caught up the crucifer's cross -- the processional crucifix mounted on a tall staff. He dashed forward, with Thomas close behind, pushed Natalie into his henchman's arms, and met Nick as the vampire spun around after striking Rankin. The cross touched Nick's cheek as he turned. He cried out and fell back, the red welt of a severe burn marking his face.

"The Code, damn you, LeNoir!" Duncan shouted. "This is holy ground -- you can't fight!"

"I can't fight you, MacLeod," LeNoir called back, his eyes never leaving Nick. He paused to catch his breath. "The Code says nothing about fighting vampires on holy ground. Truly amazing. Detective Knight! I have not encountered your like in six hundred years. I see now why I sensed something not quite the same about you. And what an *intrigant* disguise! You must tell me the story sometime."

LeNoir's man ran up then with a goblet of holy water. "Now, Monsieur Vampire Detective, you may be able to get past the crucifix and the holy water, but before you do, Thomas will have blown out the brilliant brains of your good friend the Doctor here." Nick's golden eyes found Thomas, who had retreated to a safer distance with Natalie in a hammerlock and his gun against her head.

Nick's eyes closed. When they reopened, LeNoir saw the fierce topaz had been replaced with the normal sapphire. "Your move, LeNoir," he growled, impotent fury lacerating his voice.

"Yes, isn't it? We shall rejoin Mr. MacLeod now." LeNoir motioned with the crucifix toward the chancel steps and Nick gave way before it. His eyes met Natalie's with an aching, wordless apology, as he allowed himself to be forced away to the chancel steps. Tearing his eyes from hers, Nick finally turned away. He descended to the nave, where the guards still surrounded Duncan.

"Let him go," LeNoir commanded them. Duncan was released, none too gently and pushed to stand beside Nick. His eyes sought Nick's, but Nick would not meet his gaze. LeNoir continued his commands. "Thomas, take the lady and go on ahead. Call for some of our observers outside to move to be able to view the roof exits of this building. If you do not see us leave in fifteen minutes, kill her, *Allez*."

"Yes, Monseigneur." Thomas backed out of a choir exit, Natalie still held before him. Nick raised his eyes and held her gaze till he could see her no longer. LeNoir watched his face and smiled slightly until Nick looked back at him. LeNoir broke the contact and turned to Duncan.

"Now, I believe we were discussing terms, before Detective Knight... ah... interrupted. LeNoir's polite words were now spoken in a tone as jagged as glass. "You will do as follows: Detective Knight will slow his investigation of the murder of Alec Morrison. Neither of you will attempt to locate me or the hostages. You will wait to hear from me when I am ready to discuss their release. If you are good boys, they will be released relatively unharmed. If I have any reason to believe you are pursuing them. I will regretfully begin a slow death for each of them. I will begin personally with your Tessa, MacLeod."

Duncan's fists clenched, but he controlled the desire to leap at LeNoir -- barely. LeNoir smiled again.

"We will leave now and you will stay here for another half hour. As you might have deduced from my instructions to Thomas, I have observers posted all around the cathedral -- now including the roof as well. How thoughtful of you to make me aware of your abilities in time, Detective! They are there to be sure that you gentlemen stay here for the next half hour, and that you do not call for backup to follow us. If either of these things is noted, my observers will call me and all the hostages will be killed immediately. And if I do not exit this church in -- let's see," he pulled out a gold pocket watch and checked it pretentiously, "...eleven minutes, the dutiful Thomas will kill the *très belle* Natalie. Any questions, *mes infants*?"

"Only one, LeNoir," Duncan's voice was harsh with rage and tight with control. "Would you prefer to die by decapitation or by having all your blood drained from your body?"

LeNoir's laughter was brittle. "Ambitious, aren't you, puppy?"

"Just because it doesn't happen today doesn't mean it will no' happen, Lucien LeNoir."

"Keep practicing, boy. If the day comes, you'll need it." LeNoir snapped his fingers and Andre laid a greatcoat over his shoulders. "Farewell and... oh, I almost said *'adieu'*! How thoughtless of me, Detective. Perhaps *'au revoir'* is a better choice."

"And perhaps 'Go to hell' is the best choice," Nick replied.

LeNoir merely laughed and swept out of the choir exit that Thomas had taken, his men from all points of the sanctuary following him.

As the last footsteps died away, Nick sank into a pew, white-faced and shaking. "Shit," he whispered. Duncan walked over to him and grasped his chin, turning the blond man's face to check the burn across his cheekbone. Nick jerked his face away, still not meeting Duncan's eyes. MacLeod sat down beside him and glanced at his watch.

His dark eyes moving to the exit LeNoir had taken, the highlander answered quietly, wearily, "Yeah -- he is, isn't he?"

* * * * *

The drive back to Nick's apartment was accomplished in silence. Duncan drove, since Nick was still weak from the effects of the church. Once back in the apartment, Nick pulled off his coat and staggered to the computer, weak and shaking. Duncan watched wordlessly as Nick checked for Merlin's download. Finding nothing there, Nick leaped up, grabbed a vase from the shelf near the computer and threw it against the wall. As it hit with a shattering of glass pieces, Nick fell back into the chair, exhausted.

Duncan said nothing, merely removing his own coat and laying it and his sword on the couch. He then walked to the refrigerator, pulled open the door and grasped one of the unlabelled bottles. He slammed

the door, stalked across the room and thrust the bottle at Nick. "Drink it, you daft bugger, before you fall out on me!"

Nick stared at the bottle wordlessly for a few moments, still not meeting Duncan's eyes. After a heartbeat's hesitation, he snatched the bottle, ripped the cork out with his teeth, and gulped nearly a fourth of its contents thirstily. MacLeod said nothing, simply turned and walked to Nick's wine closet and chose a Bordeaux at random. Opening it a bit more traditionally, he tossed the corkscrew aside and poured the wine into a pewter goblet from a nearby shelf. He took a long, slow drink and studied Nick over the rim.

Knight sat, drinking steadily, wrapped in a dark miasma of self-loathing. MacLeod decided after another drink that Nick's private torture chamber had gone on long enough. He sauntered over and hitched a hip on the desk. "So -- what's our next move?"

Nick glared up at MacLeod, eyes bitter with self-blame. "Come on Mac -- say t!"

"Say what?" MacLeod responded, with careful diffidence.

"You know what -- I screwed up -- royally! Not only did I botch rescuing Natalie, but I also contrived to blow a damn good chance to follow LeNoir to the others by revealing myself. I know you've got to be thinking it."

"Oh, so now you're a mind reader, too, are you?" Duncan asked, conversationally, but with a hint of steel in his voice. "Okay, Nick, if it'll make you happy -- you screwed up royally. Satisfied?"

"Ecstatic," Nick sneered, then gulped the bottle's dregs.

"Fine. Now tell me what else I'm thinking, Bodach!" MacLeod's voice was ominously quiet. "You saw a woman you love -- yes, love, Nick! -- Being held against her will by a crazy bastard who'd as soon kill her as kiss her. You saw her struck brutally and it sent it over the edge. What is so bloody amazing about that? It nearly sent me over the edge and I don't even know her. If it had been Tessa, I'd have reacted much the same."

Duncan paused, gauging Nick's reaction. The vampire tossed off the last of the drink then tossed the bottle aside, his expression shuttered. MacLeod's temper flared higher. He slammed his goblet down on the desk, the few drops left in it cascading onto the gleaming wood. He leaned closer and slapped his hand in front of Nick on the desk.

"Dammit, Nick! You want so badly to be human again, but you continue to ask more of yourself than is humanly possible! Yes, you blew your trump card but those vampire abilities nearly saved Natalie!"

Nick leaped up, knocking MacLeod aside with a casual flick of his wrist. "'Nearly' is not enough, Mac! She trusted me and I failed her!" He began to pace back and forth. Duncan strode to him and caught his shoulders, shaking hard.

"But you tried, Nick, and she knows you'll go on trying. If it hadna been for LeNoir's age and experience, you'd have had her. Those other poor bastards were ready to run."

Nick broke the Highlander's grip and turned away, still not quite able to accept his compassion. "You're telling me that if you'd been the one to blow it, you wouldn't have blamed yourself at all?"

"Course I'd ha' blamed myself." A small smile quirked up one corner of MacLeod's well-cut mouth. "But then, you'd be giving me this speech, right?"

Nick made a choking sound somewhere between a chuckle and a sob. He turned back to Duncan, shaking his head. "Damn you, Barbarian, don't cloud the issue with logic!"

MacLeod folded his arms and smiled gently. "So -- like I asked before -- what's our next move?"

Nick sighed. "I can't think of any other avenues to try to find LeNoir -- not right at the moment, anyway." Nick walked to the fridge slowly but less shakily and got out another bottle. "He's covered himself so well in this business consortium there's no way to locate him there. God knows what name he's going by now -- so trying to find him through other agencies is out. Unless Merlin or Janette calls us with something, we've got to go back to square one."

Nick drank in silence for a moment. Duncan walked back to the desk, retrieved his empty cup, and set about refilling it. "We'll find him, Nick. Whether the others come through or not -- we'll find him." Duncan sat down on the couch facing Nick and sipped his drink.

After a moment he continued, "There's something else about LeNoir that you should know, Nick, for when we do find him." Duncan turned to face his friend, his dark eyes grim. "Tonight's events made me remember it. He carries a Crusader's sword. You know what that means?"

Nick's breath caught as though he'd been struck. His jaw muscles bunched as he stared sightlessly into the bloody depths of the bottle. "Yes... oh, yes. I know what it means."

He whirled and suddenly was at the fireplace, staring into its darkness, leaving Duncan to marvel at how quickly the sustenance of blood could bring back his vampiric fluidity and grace. But his face had shown Duncan a bereavement as great as losing Natalie.

"Nick?" he entreated, quietly.

Duncan could just hear his voice, hushed, as lost as death, as dry as the dust of ages. "A Crusader's sword was especially blessed, some even by the Pope himself... back when that meant something to the world. It was usually a longsword and in its shape the soldier saw the Cross of Christ for which he fought. There was often a cross -- the Jerusalem Cross of the Crusades -- engraved on the pommel. Some few special swords even had embedded in the grip a holy relic, a lock of hair of a saint or perhaps even a splinter of the True Cross." His snort of derision displayed his modern sensibilities about the "truth" of that relic.

"You speak as one who knew such a sword." Duncan's voice was gentleness itself.

"I did, once." Nick leaned his head against the carved stone of the mantel, cradling the empty bottle as though in defense against the memory. "I carried one eight hundred years ago. I wore the cross blazoned proudly upon my white surcoat. You see, Mac, I wasn't just a Crusader... I was a consecrated Knight of the Temple of Jerusalem."

"*Mo chreach!*" Duncan's shock registered in Gaelic. "A Knight Templar?" He thought of all that Order once represented -- still represented. A Holy Order of warrior monks, sworn to protect the pilgrim routes to the Holy Land. Men who vowed poverty, chastity and obedience before God. Men who became the true chivalric ideal and one of the greatest fighting forces the world knew at the time. An Order whose honor was once so great, whose integrity so strong, that both Christian and Muslim would accept their judgments in mediation and revere their skill in battle. Men who were the closest in this jaded world to what chivalry was supposed to have been - the Knight valiant and true, "*sans peur et sans reproche*." Nick's chosen surname suddenly took on new significance.

"You never told me," Duncan breathed softly.

"No, I... I generally try not to remember it," Nick replied, wretchedly. "My fall from grace was doubly far. It was one of the reasons LeCroix chose me."

"So that was when you crossed over."

Nick nodded wearily. He turned and leaned back against the mantel, facing MacLeod, but not meeting his eyes.

"Yes... 1228. I'd been in the Holy Land for four years -- a good son of the Church. Can you believe that?" Nick laughed bitterly. "I'd gone to the Palestine as penance for a crime I did not commit, but I was happy to go. To fight for Christ, to win back His land from the infidels. Such noble ideals, such high aspirations -- such *naïveté*. The first year cracked those ideals, the succeeding ones broke them to dust. There was so much brutality on both sides and all in God's name. I was sick of death."

Duncan nodded, his eyes bleak. "I understand that feeling."

Nick glanced up at him quickly then away. "I know you do. Perhaps it may help you to understand what happened. On a mission back home to Paris, others celebrated our victories, but the wine was like gall in my mouth. And into my disillusionment stepped a beautiful woman who seduced me with her body of alabaster and her heart of darkness. With her was a powerful man who also seduced me with a promise of eternal earthly life and many black delights."

"Janette. LaCroix."

Nick nodded. "It was the ultimate irony, you know. I gave up the service of a Cross of light to serve a cross of darkness... to serve him in every way." Nick forced himself to meet Duncan's eyes steadily and found there only an understanding pathos.

"Nick -- you were not the first to choose Darkness, and you won't be the last. And once fallen, there are few who'd climb so fiercely back to the Light."

Gratitude flooded Nick's eyes as they held Duncan's. "Maybe." He paused and looked down at the empty bottle he still held. "But there was another irony I did not realize until it was too late. I had escaped death myself, but I was doomed to experience it over and over. To live off the deaths of others... to watch mortals I loved die again and again through the centuries."

Duncan put his goblet on the coffee table, rose, and walked toward the window near Nick. He stared out into the night, his face haunted. "I didn't have any choice, but my life is based on the same irony. For most Immortals, their continued existence is based on the deaths of other Immortals, even if they're not actively playing the Game. I've also known the hell of having loved mortals and lost them." He turned and

looked at Nick. "And now -- this kind of hell. Richie and Tessa -- all of them -- are hostages partly because of me."

Nick met Duncan's eyes achingly. "'We have given many hostages to fortune'," he quoted quietly. "Any mortals we dare to love are in danger."

"So you agree with Bacon?" Duncan asked. "We should not -- must not -- love, because of what we are?"

"Francis was a fool and a misogynist," Nick grated. "No matter how gifted. A home, love, a family, real friends -- for mortals these aren't impediments. They're gifts. " He looked at MacLeod with eyes that were wounded and desolate. "But his statement applies perfectly to us. Any Immortal who dares to love mortals as we do -- not just as a protector -- is defying Fate. We're wrong to expose them to the terror, anguish and death that follows us."

Duncan reached out and caught Nick's shoulders again, his dark eyes intent and compassionate. "No, Neàcail, no -- you're wrong! Don't you see? All love is risk! Everyone who loves risks pain, disillusionment, death. It goes with the territory. Tessa's taught me that it's worth the risk for mortals to love us. But it's even more important for us Immortals to take the risk to love. It's what keeps us truly human."

A desperate hope flooded Nick's eyes, but before he could reply, the phone rang shatteringly in the silence of the loft. The vampire was across the room almost before Duncan realized he'd moved.

"Knight," Nick answered tersely. After just a moment's conversation, he slammed down the receiver and grabbed his coat. "That was Merlin. He's found something -- something he thinks I wouldn't want going over the phone lines. Wants us to come to his place."

Duncan grabbed his coat and his sword. "Let's go!"

* * * * *

The tense silence inside the Caddy was broken by the purring of Nick's cell phone. Pulling it from the pocket of his duster, he spoke quickly, "Knight." Duncan watched his face as the call continued. He guessed the caller was Janette's because Nick's occasional low-voiced remarks were in French. As Nick keyed the phone off, Duncan's spirits leaped at the sudden glaring of hope in the white face.

"That was Janette. One of the Children who works for a division of LLN Corporation reports that Commissioner Davenport is a member of the Board of Trustees there. He reportedly has already amassed an enviable war chest for his probable run for Parliament in two years, of a sum that has many people wondering about its' source. And another one of her contacts with Black Phoenix Enterprises says that Captain Mark Baker is on the payroll as a security advisor -- and is very well paid for his expertise. That same contact reports a rumor that Captain Baker has rather expensive tastes and is known to indulge them quietly and with amazing ease on a police captain's salary."

Duncan whistled. "Now we're getting somewhere! Janette is amazing, isn't she? But we've got two leads -- two of the core group that knew the plans about Morrison with possible connections with LeNoir. Our time is growing short, Nick. You know LeNoir will kill them as soon as he has accomplished his move. Which one do we follow?"

Nick glanced over at Duncan with a barely leashed excitement in his eyes. "I hope that's what Merlin is going to tell us. And we're almost there."

"There" was one of the oldest and most elegant districts of Toronto, an area of tree-lined avenues and broad lawns, with high walls surrounding estates that bespoke old wealth and cultured tastes. They soon arrived at their destination. Nick turned in a sweeping drive that led through secluded grounds to an exquisite Gothic Revival mansion.

Knight and MacLeod were met at the door by a middle-aged man whose respectful capability proclaimed the professional valet. Bowing them in, he announced that Mr. Merlin was expecting them and invited them to follow him. Treading in the valet's stately wake, they passed through several rooms decorated in the styles of ages past.

Studying the surroundings with interest and familiarity, MacLeod said quietly, "This doesn't exactly look like the home of a computer wizard."

"You expected maybe a high-tech glass and chrome box?" Nick replied.

Duncan shrugged. "Seems more in character."

"Perhaps you're right," Nick replied, thoughtfully, glancing at a framed sketch that was doubtless an unknown da Vinci. "However, we know very little about Merlin's origins. There are some who say he was a wizard long before computers were ever conceived."

"You don't mean-- "

"All I know is that there is more to him than either vampire or computer expert."

Duncan's pensive look became one of amazement, which deepened as the valet opened an paneled oaken door and bowed them out of the Middle Ages and into a futuristic fantasy. The room that he and Nick entered resembled a control center of a small government agency. Sophisticated electronic equipment hummed to itself. Banks of video monitors silently displayed newscasts from around the world. And at a circular central desk there were PC components familiar to Duncan's fairly experienced eye, but they were interfaced in a way that meant little to him. What little he did comprehend indicated an intelligence-gathering system of a very high order.

The computer wizard himself rose from the center console and came toward them. Taller than either Nick or Duncan, Merlin radiated a serenity so deep it was contagious, and Duncan began to feel a thread of hope. After introductions were made, Merlin led them over to the control console.

"Since I'd already done that little job for you last year, Nick, it really wasn't too hard to get back into the Metro Police system," Merlin stated nonchalantly, though both of his listeners knew of technical expertise required to make that statement. "I downloaded the personnel files of the four men you named and then added them to the files from Phoenix you modemed me earlier. When I plugged those into my own web, some very intriguing correlations popped up."

"Let me guess," Nick replied. "You found Commissioner Richard Davenport and Captain Mark Baker both on the payroll of some portion of Black Phoenix Enterprises."

Merlin blinked. "It seems I am not the only wizard here, Nicholas."

Nick laughed. "I don't aspire to your standard, Merlin. I had a call from Janette on the way here. At my request she'd put feelers out amongst the Children."

"Ah, yes, Janette has her own kind of 'web', doesn't she?" Merlin smiled enigmatically.

Nick returned the grin. "I'll have to tell her about that analogy. She would find it amusing." He went on to relay the information Janette had given him.

"Janette's information is a good place to start, Nick. Let me help you narrow the field." Merlin folded his long frame at the desk and called up the file on Commissioner Davenport. You see here that Richard Davenport is indeed a member of the Board of Trustees of LLN Corporation. He is paid an honorarium for his service, but receives no other perks nor does he own any voting stock."

"What about campaign contributions? Janette's sources say he has gathered a sizeable war chest that has some people wondering already."

"He's been investigated by several watchdog groups because of it, and they all agree that the sources of this money are well-documented and completely above board. Everything I can access shows his contributions have come in the old-fashioned way -- with hard work at the grassroots level, good organization, and people who respect his abilities and character."

"So his connection with LLN Corporation is purely coincidental to this situation?" Duncan asked.

"As far as I can ascertain -- and that's at a fairly microscopic level -- Davenport is as clean as the proverbial whistle, Mr. MacLeod. His lifestyle is consistent with his reported income; all the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed." With several clicks of the mouse, Davenport's file was replaced by Baker's. "With your Captain Baker, it initially appeared to be the same. But with the information from his file -- and the resources available to me here -- I was able to dig just a bit deeper, and some things just don't add up."

"Like what?" Duncan asked.

"As Janette's informants suggested, Captain Mark Baker is on the payroll of Black Phoenix Enterprises as a security consultant."

"That's not unheard of," Nick replied. "Police officers often moonlight in security work, personal protection, and related areas."

"True. But Captain Baker seems to be involved at Black Phoenix at an unusually high level, and to be reimbursed equally generously. Not enough to excite your Internal Affairs Department, Nick, but enough to be interesting when correlated with the rest."

Nick and Duncan exchanged glances of anticipation. Merlin's fingers danced over the keyboard and the video screens lighted with a montage of news items and local reports, all centering around Captain Mark

Baker. Still photos and video footage depicted an elegantly tuxedoed and appointed Baker at theater openings, grand nights at the opera, and charity balls, with a succession of beautiful, expensively gowned women at his side.

Merlin indicated the screens with a wave of a long-fingered hand. "Moreover, Baker's lifestyle is inconsistent with his reported income."

"So he's lying about the amount that this company is paying him, so as not to tip off Internal Affairs," Duncan ventured. "Greedy, but not necessarily damning."

"True." Merlin clicked in more commands and other records were displayed on the computer screen. "But if he is, he's keeping the big bucks elsewhere, because they're not in his bank accounts."

"Numbered Swiss accounts come in handy that way."

"Precisely, Mr. MacLeod. And though I could break into those Swiss banking computers eventually it would do me no good without the ID numbers."

"Wait a minute," Nick cautioned. "We don't want to jump to conclusions here. I remember Schanke saying once that Baker came from a wealthy background. This could all be unrelated to his connection to Black Phoenix."

"Oh, but now for the *pièce de resistance*, Nick," Merlin replied, rubbing his hands together. Tapping in more commands, Merlin continued. "Mark Baker was orphaned at an early age, but adopted not long after that by a wealthy recluse who raised him and sent him to the best schools. Then, rather interestingly, instead of going into business with his wealthy guardian, Baker chose to go through the Police Academy. There he distinguished himself, then later rose through the ranks to be one of the youngest captains on the force."

"Sounds like a real success story," MacLeod commented, thoughtfully. "Where's the catch?"

"The catch, Mr. MacLeod, is in the identity of Baker's reclusive guardian." Merlin touched a key and indicated the video screens. "This is the only picture available of Mark Baker and that elusive gentleman."

Knight and MacLeod both stepped closer to the screens to be able to see the black and white picture better. "What's the guardian's name?" Nick asked.

"He's a billionaire industrialist who owns a large estate up on Lake Simcoe. His name is Lucas Black."

The aquiline profile, the deep-set light blue eyes and the heavy signet ring of the older man in the picture came together for MacLeod at the same time that the significance of the name dawned on Knight.

"That's him!" Duncan declared excitedly. "He's obviously grayed his hair and made himself look older, but that man is Lucien LeNoir!"

"Lucien 'the Black'!" Nick added, translating the French, "*Lucas Black!*"

Both men whirled for the door. Nick turned, walking backwards, to call out, "Thank you a hundred times, Merlin! Let me know what we owe you!"

"I'll send you my bill, Nick!" he called to their rapidly retreating footsteps.

* * * * *

Captain Mark Baker pushed his front door closed behind him with a sigh. *A long day and a longer night*, he thought, *but worth the effort. Knight and MacLeod have been neutralized as any kind of threat and Monseigneur's plans can go forward without hindrance.* He laughed gently, imagining their frustration at having their hands tied so neatly, and no way to locate LeNoir.

He stepped forward in the moonlit entry hall to drop his mail and keys onto the side table. As he pulled off his coat, he noticed it -- the subtle feeling sliding up his spine. It was the instinct that told him he was not alone. He dropped the coat and whirled, scrabbling to hit the lightswitch, but it was too late.

Strong hands caught his arms roughly before he could reach it. He was slammed forward, face first, against the front door. The blow robbed him of breath and sent a trickle of blood down from his already swelling nose. A powerful grip kept his arm twisted behind his back and his face pressed up against the wood. He gasped for air and tried to inch his right hand towards his gun.

"I wouldn't advise it," a deep voice spoke from out of the darkness. The words were accompanied by a sharp jerk to his captured arm. Pain blazed through his arm and shoulder, and he dropped his right hand to his side.

"I'd listen to him if I were you," came another voice, but this one was familiar. "I wouldn't advise you of much right now -- unless it was your rights." The lights came on abruptly.

Baker saw Nicholas Knight with his hand on the switch. Nick reached in and deftly removed his gun, releasing the clip with a quick motion. He pocketed the clip and tossed the gun across the room.

Baker played for time, pushing against the strength that held him. "Detective Knight -- Nick! What the hell is the meaning of this attack?" The strong grip tightened on his arms, spun him around and slammed him against the door.

The man who held him against the door was also familiar. Duncan MacLeod glared at him fiercely, as Knight replied, "We don't have time for your bullshit, Captain." Scorn dripped from the word. "We know who you are, we know about your relationship with Lucien LeNoir. We know you're LeNoir's mole inside Metro Police. And we know that you're the bastard that led LeNoir to the precise time and place to kidnap our friends."

MacLeod pushed Baker harder against the door and added, with dangerous quiet, "And we are really pissed."

Nick stepped closer and continued with menacing intensity, "So, now you are going to tell us where to find LeNoir and our friends -- fast!"

MacLeod relaxed his grip slowly. Baker straightened his rumpled suit and dabbed a handkerchief to his nose. "Even if such a fantasy was true," he said, putting the handkerchief in his pocket, "you'd never be able to prove it."

Abruptly, at the last word, Baker launched a blow at MacLeod. The Scotsman blocked with the lightening speed of nearly four centuries of practice. He caught Baker's arm and threw the police captain to land in a sprawl on the floor. As Baker tried to leap to his feet, Duncan's foot shot out in a kung fu kick that caught the smaller man in the stomach. His breath whooshing out, Baker fell back to his knees. MacLeod caught the front of his suit, pulled him up, and struck him repeatedly in the face.

Nick leaped forward and grabbed MacLeod's arm. "Mac, dammit -- wait! Stop!"

"Wait -- for what, Nick?" MacLeod snapped. Baker sagged in his grip even as the Scotsman tried to pull away from Nick. "We need to know where they are!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Nick shot back. "Think about it -- why bother beating this slime into a bloody pulp and possibly still not getting it out of him? You're forgetting... I know a better way."

Nick's eyes were suddenly molten and his fangs emerged. Duncan's eyes widened in understanding. "Do it!"

"You're digging your own grave, Knight," Baker spat, as he raised his head. "I'll have you up on charges so fast--" All at once he caught sight of Nick's face, and terror took his voice.

"Don't fuck with me, Baker!" Nick caught Baker's chin with strong pale fingers. "You're going to tell us just what we need to know."

Baker was suddenly caught by the mesmerizing power of Nick's glowing gaze...

* * * * *

"Skid" Rankin stepped out into the frigid night with a muttered curse at leaving the warmth of the house and his bed behind him. He paused in the alcove of the doorway to light a cigarette out of the biting north wind. He then shouldered his AK-47 more comfortably and glanced around. Glimpsing a dark bulk near the sheltered corner of the building he ambled toward it.

"Hey, Spence, time to go in and let your ass thaw out!"

The figure, still dim in the fading moonlight, turned and started pacing toward him with a casual wave. With his attention on the approaching man, Rankin did not notice the rush of air that heralded a presence behind him. Suddenly, hands of almost supernatural strength grasped him from behind. He was thrust into a headlock, and his surprised gasp of breath was cut off by one of those cold hands clamped over his mouth.

"Sorry -- I don't think Spence wants to come in now," a silky, menacing voice spoke at his ear. "I'll go in for him, though."

Rankin struggled futilely against the powerful arms. He wondered why Spence, now very close and obviously aware of his situation, was not running to his aid or sounding the alarm. As the approaching figure stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight, Rankin stopped struggling abruptly, realizing it was not Spence but a taller, darker man. A stranger.

As the stranger reached them, he said, pleasantly, "Yeah, I want to go in for him, too -- it's cold out here. So why don't you help us do just that, friend?"

The iron hand covering his mouth moved away and Rankin sucked in his breath for a scream. Before it could escape the dark stranger struck him a blow to the belly that left him doubled over in his unseen captor's grip and wheezing like a bellows.

Over his wheezes the long-haired stranger observed sadly, "That wasn't very helpful, friend. One way or another you're going to help us get in there without setting off any alarms. Why don't you make it easy on all of us?"

"Go to hell!" he choked out.

"Too late," said the quietly menacing voice behind him. He was picked up bodily as though his one hundred and eighty pounds were feathers. His captor turned him around and slammed him against the wall. Suddenly, Rankin recognized the face of a recent nightmare, of blazing golden eyes and glittering, brutal fangs that he last saw in St. Michael's cathedral. He realized his captor was holding him off the ground effortlessly with one hand.

"You're already there," the dark haired man informed him.

The glowing eyes of his captor widened in recognition. "Wait, this is the bastard from the church -- the one who hit Natalie!" The grip on Rankin's neck tightened lethally. He tore at the steely grip, to no avail. Rankin's vision went dark.

Suddenly the choking vise at his throat was released and welcome air flooded his lungs. He fell to the earth coughing. He looked up to see the dark man whom he now also recognized from the church, holding the other back.

"Jesus H. Christ -- what are you?"

The snarl became a growl and the being lunged against the restraining hands. Rankin felt a whimper of atavistic fear escape his throat. "You don't want to find out," the dark man warned. "Now, you're going to help us get in this place or my friend's going to rip your heart out of your chest and drink it dry. So what'll it be?"

Some moments later, in the security room on the main floor of the chateau, Tiny Tanaka was on the graveyard shift watching the video screens. He shifted his muscular bulk in the protesting chair and watched Skid Rankin come back in the door he had exited shortly before. As Skid punched in the required ID code, Tiny activated the intercom and spoke into it. "Hey, Rankin, too cold for you out there?"

"Yeah, well, I just forgot my cigarettes," Rankin replied woodenly. He walked very close to the camera. "Spence is covering while I get'em."

"Well, you better get back out there. Sounds like you need some cold air to wake you up."

"Yeah," Rankin replied, slowly. "Guess so." He stood at the camera a moment longer before moving off. Just as he left the camera's range, every screen in front of the guard went blank.

"Oh, hell, the circuit breaker must've tripped again!" the large Japanese-Canadian muttered to himself. He heaved himself from his chair like a sumo wrestler rising from the mat and lumbered out of the security room. He made the long walk from the top floor of the chateau, across the vast bulk of the central section and down into the subterranean fastness of the cellars, grumbling as he walked.

On reaching the darkened room where the huge breaker box was located, Tiny fumbled for the light switch. His hand encountered a cold grasp instead. With a cry he tried to jerk his hand back, but the clasp of the other hand was like steel and ice. His cry was suddenly choked off by an identical clasp around his throat. His arm was bent behind his back with dangerous ease.

"Were you the only guard watching the monitors tonight?" came a voice laced with silken menace next to his ear.

Tiny struggled against the arms that held him with his considerable strength, sure he could gain the upper hand soon enough. "What's it to you, Jack?"

"I don't think I like your tone."

Tanaka screamed as his arm was bent just to the snapping point and then released back to the original hold. Sweat popped out on his forehead and his breath gasped raggedly.

"Answer my question or I break it," the voice said with ominous courtesy.

"All right! Yeah -- I was the only one in there tonight."

"Much better. Now, I want to know where your prisoners are," the suave, terrifying voice said softly. "You will tell me or I will slash your throat and drink the warm blood as it bursts from your arteries and you will never tell anyone anything again."

Tiny knew his captor was smaller than he; he also knew he had never experienced the kind of superhuman strength that held him now, nor the primal terror that rose from some ancient place in his mind. "I -- I ain't sure. They're in the cellars s-somewhere," he stuttered.

His arm was bent again and the hand at his throat squeezed, choking off his scream of pain.

"I don't like your answer," the voice spoke over his futile thrashing. "Tell me what I want to know or I taste your hemoglobin." Something razor sharp and two-pronged raked the skin of his neck gently. The relentless grip at his throat eased and Tiny began to babble.

"Okay -- okay! Don't do it, man, please! I'll tell you what I know -- just don't cut me!"

"Tell it, then!"

"Roger put 'em all in separate rooms when they came back from wherever they took the shorter broad. They're somewhere on this level or the one below us -- but exactly where I don't know--"

"How can you be watching on the video monitors and not know where the prisoners are located? It doesn't make sense and that makes me angry--"

"No -- no, don't!" Tanaka screamed as his arm was pressed backward excruciatingly. "For real, man, these two levels are mazes and they both look alike! I ain't been on guard duty since they put 'em in the cells. I only saw 'em on video, so there's no way I could tell you which ones they're in."

The grip on his throat and arm tightened again. "You're sure about that?"

"Don't speak too soon," the voice said, the pressure on his throat increased to a suffocating tightness. Clawing at the vise-like hand with desperate, tearing blows of his free hand, Tanaka found his vision blurring and his muscles weakening. In less than a moment, his awareness spiraled down into darkness...

The light came on. Duncan turned his gaze from the light-switch to see Nick's topaz eyes flicker up from the large unconscious man he had lowered so easily to the floor. The topaz melted into dark indigo as Duncan watched.

"Three down," the vampire whispered, as he tied the guard hand and foot and left him beside the still form of Skid Rankin, also bound and gagged.

Duncan nodded. "So far so good. Reconnaissance is a lot easier when you can mesmerize the opposition as you did that first guard."

"He said that LeNoir is here. Can you feel him?" Nick asked, curiously.

"Not yet, but this is a big place. We obviously just need to be closer than we are. And I plan for that to happen," Duncan added grimly.

"So he can't sense you until you sense him? The same as with you and me?" Duncan nodded and Nick continued, "So as far as we know we've still got surprise on our side."

"Yeah -- until he feels my aura. And assuming there was only one of them in the video room tonight, as this one said."

"Hopefully we can find them quickly since these guys only seem to know for sure that they're on one of these basement levels."

"Even these two levels are a lot to search, Nick," Duncan said. "It could take a long time even with your abilities. We've only got about three hours before dawn."

"I don't think I'm going to like what you're proposing." Nick studied the Scotsman intently.

"Too bad. You know it's the best way, Nick. You go after the hostages, I provide some diversions and go after LeNoir."

"You're not facing him without me. I want a piece of the bastard."

"Surely you remember Immortals must face each other one-on-one. My score goes back farther, Nick. Besides, we've both got secrets that can be dangerous and burdensome for mortals. We don't need them here when I confront LeNoir."

"What about Tessa and Richie? They're not going to want to leave without you."

"Tell them I love them, but I must face LeNoir. They won't like it, but they'll understand. Take them to the car and wait for me as long as you think appropriate. With any luck, I'll already be there waiting."

The struggle between opposing desires was evident on Nick's face, but did not last long. "All right. I'll see out friends to safety -- but I'm not promising anything else." Nick held out his hand and Duncan

clasped it as before, warrior to warrior. "Fight well, my friend. Keep your head where it is -- after three centuries I've grown rather fond of it there."

Duncan smiled but his eyes were grave. "If you knew what my friends meant to me, you'd know what it means that I'm entrusting them to you, Nick, and with good heart. Take care and get out before sunrise. I don't want to lose you, either, *Bodach*."

Hands tightened on forearms briefly; blue eyes met black with an intense gaze that locked and held in wordless comprehension. "*Au revoir*, Mac," Nick said quietly, firmly.

"*Beannachd leat*, Nick," Duncan replied, softly, with equal meaning.

They turned and strode off in opposite directions, each wondering if he'd ever see the other again.

* * * * *

Firelight carved Lucien LeNoir's face into sharp relief as he studied a fax. Glancing up at the assiduous Roger, he placed the fax in a folder before him on the desk. "It seems that all arrangements with the Bogota connections are underway. Any more difficulties with the transport situation?"

"No, Monseigneur. Thomas and his group took care of the snags, as per your suggestion. They will be flying back in tomorrow."

"*Très bien*. It left us somewhat short-handed at this rather critical time, but the gamble was obviously worth it. All the details of moving the operation are in motion. Once those men are back tomorrow, we can start dismantling what we need to move from here to our new headquarters. Now, do you have the figures on--"

The shrilling of Roger's cell phone cut off LeNoir's question. At his boss's impatient wave, the younger man pulled out the phone and spoke into it. After a moment's conversation, Roger replaced the phone in his jacket pocket.

"That was Logan. He's got a situation in the west wing. A fire has broken out in one of the first floor storage areas. He says it's not too bad, but he may need some help containing it and securing the area."

LeNoir frowned. "What does he think caused it?"

"He says he thinks it was electrical to begin with, but sparks ignited some boxes of solvents stored there, so it's tricky to manage."

LeNoir nodded, but the frown remained in place. "It could be a problem -- we certainly don't need firefighters here. Go evaluate the situation for yourself, Roger, and get any men you need to take care of it. I don't care who you must awaken. Report back to me as soon as possible."

"As you wish, Monseigneur."

Roger strode out, leaving LeNoir pouring over reports and faxes in the amber hued light, like a spider examining its web for strength.

* * * * *

Don Schanke paced the length and breadth of the cell-like storage room that had confined him since Natalie's return. He had awakened from a brief nap a few minutes earlier to find that much of the dizziness and weakness seemed to be passing and his strength returning. He still did not feel like running any races, but he was definitely better. Try as he could, though, he could find no way out of his current prison. His only hope, as he saw it, was to be ready to jump whatever guard came to his door first. What the hell difference did a gun make? They were going to kill him anyway, right?

Suddenly, the doorknob rattled. Schanke was startled and almost forgot his plan. With abrupt remembrance, he flicked off the light switch and quietly stepped behind the door. There was a quick jolt to the entire door as though the person outside was having trouble with the lock. But then the door began to swing slowly inward. Schanke laced his fingers together to form both fists into a club.

"Psst... Natalie... Schanke. Are you there?" came a familiar whisper.

Schanke lowered his hands. "Nick?" he replied incredulously.

The door opened wider and a silhouetted head appeared at its edge. Glowing eyes in the dimly viewed face turned toward Schanke as though able to penetrate the darkness of his hiding place effortlessly.

"Schanke -- yes, it's me." The door opened wider as Don moved back into the room out of the way, switching on the light as he did so. Nick entered, pushing the door closed behind him, and grabbed his partner in a brief, fierce hug.

"Jesus, Nick, it really is you!" Schanke replied, still stunned. Then, as his amazement gave way to belief, he grinned and returned the hug. As they pulled back, Schanke realized Nick was observing the laceration and bruising on his head.

"One of the creeps that grabbed us grazed me with a slug. Natalie's worked on it; she says I've got a concussion. It was pretty bad when I first came to, but I've got some rest since then. I think that's helped."

Nick spoke quietly. "Until we saw Natalie at the meet with LeNoir, I wasn't sure what had happened. All we had at the scene was a pool of blood. And Grace saw you being carried off -- she said you looked bad, so I feared the worst." He grinned, almost masking the fear that still haunted his eyes. "If I had only known that it was your head they hit, I wouldn't've worried so much."

Schanke grinned back. "I'm glad to see you, too, Nicky-boy. Now don't get me wrong but -- how the hell did you find us?"

Nick said seriously, "Well, a little magic helped -- I had a wizard and a warrior helping me." At his partner's amazed look, he laughed and continued, "It's a long story, Schank, but it was basically good detective work, just like you taught me."

Schanke shook his head. "You're as weird as ever, Nick, but I'm glad you're on my side."

"Always. Look -- can we discuss this later? Right now we've got to find the others. Our meter's running-- "

The door crashed open. "I'd say your time's up."

Nick and Schanke turned to see one of the guards at the cell's entrance with a heavy gauge sawed-off shotgun aimed at them. Not just any guard, but a redhead with a bandage circling his forehead and one eye swollen shut and black with bruising.

Schanke groaned. Nick glanced at him questioningly. The guard spoke as if in answer. "I see your pal there recognizes me. But then he should. He and the other three tricked me and Jake, made fools out of us and nearly escaped. They nearly killed me... and Jake just died..."

He looked at Schanke. "I came down here to kill you because of Jake. I was kinda worried about what to tell Monseigneur, but since you're trying to escape anyway, I don't even have to think up a lie."

Without even glancing at each other, Nick and Schanke began slowly turning and pulling apart to present two targets. "Now, wait a second, man," Schanke began, trying to work the guy to buy another moment, to get one of them in position to jump him. "I'm sorry about your friend -- can't we talk this over?"

Listening to Schanke trying to soothe the man, Nick's mind raced to come up with a way out for them. He berated himself for not noticing the heartbeat and the footfalls of the intruder in his all-too-human joy and relief at finding his friend alive. And now that human feeling could get that friend killed, here at the moment of rescue. He sought the redhead's mind, sought for an element of control as Schanke continued his efforts.

"You had to know it wasn't personal, man! We had to try to escape--"

"I'll show you personal, pig!"

In a moment of coalescing time, Schanke saw the redhead aiming at him, saw the decision in his eyes, saw his finger squeeze the trigger. Before he could move, or think, Nick leapt in front of him. Schanke screamed, "NO!" and tried to push Nick back.

--but the shotgun roared and he realized he had not been quick enough...

* * * * *

"*Quel couillon!* Where is he?" LeNoir growled as Roger's continued absence irritated him. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out his own cell phone, and punched in Roger's code. His mind was racing ahead on the figures before him when he realized his second-in-command had had ample time to answer. Frowning slightly, he disconnected that call and punched in the number of the video monitor room.

No answer, once again. LeNoir stood, his accounts and arrangements forgotten.

"MacLeod," he whispered. His crystalline eyes burned with a cold hate. He stepped to the fireplace and pulled his sword from its scabbard. As he looked down at the longsword, he remembered the Saracens he had killed as a mortal -- not for the snivelling priests' puling about the purity of the Holy Land and the glory of

Christ, but for blood and gold and power. As he beheld the cross engraved on the hilt above his family motto, he thought of all the Immortals he'd vanquished since gaining his own Immortality. As he gripped the pommel and thought of the saint's hair encased therein, he remembered Melisande and swore again that MacLeod should pay for her death with his blood.

With madness in his eyes and a cruel smile curving his lips, he spun out of the room, sword in hand, to find his quarry.

* * * * *

Duncan MacLeod, none too gently, laid the unconscious body of Roger beside his fellows in the bare storage room. He grabbed up the keys he had found in one man's pocket and exited the room, pulling the heavy wooden door shut behind him. Locking the door, he tossed the keys behind an old trunk in a corner. Grabbing his katana and a fire extinguisher, he ran down the hall to an old office where the small blaze he'd started had grown dangerously larger in contact with a small can of paint thinner. He sprayed the area liberally, watched it for a moment and, when no further flames were showing, placed the canister on the floor.

Eight more guards out of commission and a little hell raised. That ought to even the odds for Nick, he thought as he ran from the room, ready now to hunt for LeNoir. Now, Monseigneur, it's you and I. At least we won't be fighting in a burning house.

But behind him, a tongue of flame leaped irrepressibly from one of the smoking boxes.

* * * * *

Schanke knew he screamed "NO!" but knew that no one heard it, because at that moment the redhead pulled the trigger. The sound of the explosion of shot from both barrels of the 10 gauge in the confined space ripped into his ears and masked the sound of his voice. The blast hit Nick full in the chest and knocked him flying backward into Schanke. The heavier man clutched his partner reflexively as the force knocked them both off their feet.

Schanke hit the floor and managed to roll a little to keep his head from bouncing on the concrete. As Nick's limp body struck him, the blow took some of his breath, but suddenly time seemed to be moving more normally.

Schanke took in a whooping breath and sat up, pulling Nick around to see the extent of his wounds. He almost retched at the sight that met his eyes. Nick looked as though he had been struck by a bomb. His shirt and duster were no more than bloody tatters framing a massive chest wound from which blood poured in torrents. Schanke ripped off his coat and stuffed it into the wound, holding it with all the strength he had. Bones crunched under his hand and he realized that Nick's sternum and ribcage were shattered.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, Nick," he groaned. "What have you done? Hold on, Nick, hold on!"

Laughter grated into his consciousness. Schanke looked up through a haze of rage and pain to see the redhead gazing down at him grinning. "Well, it wasn't what I intended, but looks like you're hurt worse by your pal here buyin' the farm than anything that could happen to you. No need to talk to him -- he's dead, just like Jake. I'll just leave you two to a nice little visit. `Bye, cop!"

The door closed behind him and the lock clicked fast. Schanke looked down at Nick, his face peppered with grazes from the shot. Tears leaked unnoticed from the darker man's eyes as he felt for a pulse in the carotid artery, a pulse he did not expect to find. When he did locate it, he knew it could not last much longer.

"No, Nick, please, not like this. I can't bear it. Why the hell did you do it?"

Amazingly, Schanke saw Nick's eyes stir, then blink slowly open. His gaze was cloudy at first but gradually focused on Schanke's face. The well-cut lips formed words that Schanke had to strain to hear, even so close.

"Had to do it, Schank... Myra... Jenny. Be okay...you'll see. Wait... jus' don't be afraid... Schank..."

Nick's eyes closed and his head lolled to the side.

"NO!" Don Schanke screamed as the pain ripped into his heart. He pulled Nick close to him, heedless of blood and gore, and buried his face in Nick's shoulder. And for long moments, Don Schanke knew no more.

* * * * *

Flitting soundlessly from the shadowed corridor into the firelit Great Hall, Duncan felt as though he had gone back in time. The huge chamber was very close to his memories of the Hall in his father's lord's castle. Flames from the enormous fireplace and thick candles in sconces animated the room in a dance of honeyed light and velvet shadow. Painted and gilded hammer beams girded the vaulted ceiling; carven wooden bannisters lined the darkened opening of the minstrel's gallery halfway up the wall opposite the fireplace. Wooden floors were painted around the edges with the same fanciful designs of vines and flowers that graced the beams, barely glimpsed in the dancing, amber light. Suits of armor of various periods, swords and shields and heavy, intricately carved Jacobean chairs were placed at intervals around the walls, between tall, Gothic-arched windows. A massive table, also Jacobean, occupied a place of honor in front of the fire. Down the long of the room, there was another Gothic-arched entranceway into the Hall from the opposite wing.

From that direction, Duncan suddenly felt the electric calling in his mind that heralded the presence of another Immortal, the sensation growing with each step he took into the room. A figure emerged from the shadows of that far corridor and brandy-colored light glittered on a straight swordblade.

"*Tiens, mon ami*, my bull-headed Scot, you found my humble abode," LeNoir called as they slowly approached one another. "In through the servant's entrance, it seems, but I suppose it's an choice *apropos* for a brutish Highlander."

MacLeod smiled, feeling the fey exhilaration of battle beginning to sing in his Celtic blood. "Aye, a Highlander, LeNoir -- mad Celts who love to match their blades with all comers. Much like our cousins the Franks." He smiles wider as, closer now, he saw LeNoir's mouth twist at this reminder of their similarities. "It seems you were expecting me."

"*En vérité*, no, not until my men began disappearing. I must admit I'm rather surprised by your investigative skills. Your hemophagic friend must actually know his job."

Duncan's smile widened as he shrugged himself carefully out of his long coat and tossed it away. "He does indeed."

"And what was the weak link? How did you trace me?"

"Your *protégé* Captain Baker." They were within twenty feet of each other now, beginning to circle warily as they closed to sword's length. MacLeod felt adrenaline and many lifetimes of experience heighten his senses so that he could listen to LeNoir without being distracted from the older Immortal's sword arm.

"Young Mark?" LeNoir actually seemed taken aback, Duncan thought, though he covered it well. "And how did you leave him?"

"Functional, though less arrogant, after our... chat with him. He is now in the hands of the police department's internal affairs office. No good to you any more."

"Strange... I would have thought his connection to me was obscure enough to escape detection."

"Oh, it was deep enough, by ordinary means," Duncan's smile widened. "But we got help tracing it from some vampires and a wizard."

They were face to face now, blades extended. LeNoir's suave demeanor could not hide from MacLeod the anger and hate that glittered in his normally shark-cool eyes. "I have all the more reason to kill you then, MacLeod -- first Melisande and now Mark."

"I have had the opportunity to come between you and the people you've manipulated, haven't I, LeNoir? Just lucky, I guess."

"Until now, *un petit salaud*." LeNoir's jaw bunched. "I will take your head and your Quickening and then your woman. I shall cause her and the rest of your friends to die screaming. And your *bon ami* the vampire shall receive my special attention. I've wondered since meeting him if there is truth to the old legends about the sun's effects on such demons."

"Interesting, isn't it, how some humans are so much more demonic than the demons themselves?" MacLeod's voice hardened and his sword struck the other *en garde*. "You'll do no such evil because you must get through me first!"

"With ease, *jeune voyou*!" Their swords clashed in a shimmering arc as they met in a contest too long delayed.

* * * * *

Richie Ryan knew something was wrong. He knew by the sudden running feet outside the storeroom that was his cell, and then the sudden unnatural quiet that ensued. And if something was wrong for LeNoir, it must be right for his hostages. He strode to the door of his prison and studied the lock. It unfortunately was new and fairly well made, with no access to him on this side. However, the wood of the door jamb was old and obviously had sustained some termite damage.

He ran to the back of the room where old wooden crates were stacked. He dug through several but found little but decaying packing material. In his haste, he dislodged one crate that fell to the floor with a splintering crash. Rich kneeled beside the wreckage and ripped out a reasonably sound board with a rusting nail still well-fixed in the wood at one end. He ran back to the door and began digging in the softened and rotting wood of the facing that secured the bolt.

It disintegrated in a most satisfying way.

* * * * *

Schanke wasn't sure just how long he'd sat, holding and rocking Nick's cooling body. He'd been sitting there while thoughts of his and Nick's four-year partnership ran through his mind and tears ran down his face. Now, he suddenly arrived in the stark and painful present, with Nick dead and bloodied in his arms and his own body cold and stiff from sitting still on the icy floor for so long.

He looked down at Nick's remarkably peaceful and beautiful face. "I gotta put you down now, buddy. Gotta get up and get out of here. I've gotta go see a certain redhead and his boss. They're not gonna get away with it, Nick, I swear it to you." He gently laid Nick's body down onto the floor, pulling his ragged duster together over the ruin of his chest. "I'm goin' for just a while, Nicky-boy, but I'll be back to get you -- I promise."

Schanke looked at Nick a moment longer, grief and pain lodging like a stone in his heart. Dashing an unsteady hand across his eyes, he rose stiffly and walked to the door to again examine his chances of getting free.

Behind him and unseen, blood that had pooled on the floor near Nick's body began slowly to be drawn back into the terrible wounds.

* * * * *

The ringing clang of swords echoed through the Hall. The swordsmen fought fiercely with centuries and countless lifetimes of experience evident in their battle. The pace was breathless and relentless, fueled by ancient hate and lasting wounds. The blades danced as though forming a dynamic sculpture, scintillating in the saffron firelight. Thrust--parry--lunge--faster than sight or thought. The two Immortals fought with incomparable passion and brilliance, their deadly dance threading throughout the Great Hall.

MacLeod knew within the first few minutes that he had met his match, if not more so, but he did not dwell on that thought, for therein lay death as his several Masters had taught him. Instead, he sunk himself deep in the *zazen* of the *bushido*, the meditative state of the Way of the Warrior. His dragon-hilted *katana* became an extension of his body and his intellect was subsumed in his *ch'i*. He did not notice the sweat that bathed him, nor the ache in his arm, but only the bright and fervent epiphany of action.

And in that joyous glory, he smiled.

* * * * *

Richie tore away the remaining shreds of wood that covered the bolt. As he did so, the door sighed open a crack as though released from captivity. Richie tossed the board down and slowly opened the door. Glancing out, he stood for a moment looking both ways and listening carefully.

Nothing. No guard, no sounds, no further commotion as he'd heard earlier. He stepped out into the hallway, looking both ways down the featureless corridor. He pause, then dashed back into the cell, reappearing quickly with his former tool clutched in his hand. With the protruding nail, he scratched an arrow into the wall beside his door in the direction he decided to go. Somewhere or other, on this level or the next,

his fellow hostages were imprisoned and he meant to find them. He turned first in the direction that, hours earlier, he thought he had heard Natalie's voice, perhaps when they had brought her back from the meet.

He also felt, irrationally, that Duncan was somewhere about. Why, he did not know, unless he just wanted to see him so very badly. Somehow, it was part and parcel of the weird connection that had existed between them since before Duncan had 'adopted' him three years ago, since Richie had been drawn over and over to watch and follow Duncan and his cousin Connor MacLeod. Maybe that was what family was, he thought.

But for now, he was out and would stay that way, one way or another. And he would by God find the others if he could in this maze.

Still, he'd feel pretty good if he could see Mac's tall form around the next corner.

* * * * *

Schanke paced the room again, looking for a way out. There were no old boxes or crates in this storeroom, no windows, nothing but the door. Schanke returned to it, skirting Nick's body carefully, reverently, but without looking at it too closely, as though not seeing the terrible truth would make it not be real. He knelt at the door and examined the lock, testing the doorknob, the casing, everything.

He was busy at this for several minutes when suddenly he heard a strange sound behind him, a faint sound at the edge of his hearing. The sound became louder and his mind went blank as comprehension grew. It could only be --

Schanke's thoughts drained away in shock and denial. He froze for a breathless moment until he realized he must know. Slowly, so slowly, still on his knees, he turned.

Nick sat upright, gazing at him with a terrible intensity magnified by the lambent yellow of his eyes. In his snarling mouth, Schanke saw razorlike fangs. Schanke's horror and stupefaction burst through the shock when he realized that the sound he'd heard was Nick growling menacingly.

Schanke fell back against the door. "Holy Mother of God! What in God's name has happened to you, Nick?"

The growling ceased and Nick's face changed slowly. The snarl slowly faded as a desperately gained recognition crept onto Nick's changed features. "Schanke?" the anguished whisper lisped haltingly past the fangs.

Schanke swallowed convulsively. "Jesus... Nick, what are you? How... how can you even be alive?"

"What happened?" came the tortured whisper. "Where are we?"

"LeNoir's chateau. You -- you were shot. You jumped in the way. Nick... oh God, Nick, you were dead!"

Nick's eyelids closed, shuttering the luminous eyes. "I remember now." His eyes reopened, and were again their deep indigo; somehow the fangs, too, were withdrawn. "I never wanted you to know, Schank. I cherished your ignorance, your acceptance of me as I wished to be."

Schanke's voice shook as reaction set in, horror and joy warring on his face. "Nick... how? He blew a hole in your chest and it's gone, it's healed. How, Nick? You were dead!"

"I've been dead for eight hundred years, Schank." Nick's voice was gentle and wretched. "I am a vampire."

Schanke's mouth moved, but no sound came out. He stared at Nick in horror and wonder, fear and disbelief.

Nick continued slowly. "I told you... before... that it would be all right. What I meant was that I *could not* die -- not from a shotgun blast. That as soon as my body repaired itself, I would return. It's happened before. I met Natalie this way."

"Natalie -- Natalie knows? Knows that you're -- that you're a..."

"A vampire." A ghost of a smile touched Nick's mouth. "Yes, she knows."

Horror filled Schanke's face. "And you -- you drink people's blood--"

"NO!" Nick whispered desperately. "No -- not for the last hundred years. In that time I haven't killed for blood. I've lived on the blood of animals and tried to find a cure. Now Natalie is helping me."

Acceptance suddenly flooded Schanke's face. "Your sun allergy... the blood in your refrigerator you said was a paint thickener... never eating anything... My God, how could I have been so blind? Nick, you're a vampire!"

Nick smiled, but his voice shook with earnestness as he continued, "I'm the same as I've been since you've know me, Schank. Being a cop is my way to -- to pay for what I've done, my path to salvation. Can you... can you accept what I am and go back to where we were?"

Schanke looked at Nick, and all the ambivalent emotions struggled in his face. "I don't know, Nick. Can we -- can anybody ever go back again?" He rose stiffly to his feet and stepped closer to his partner. "Right now -- I'm just glad you're alive--"

"STOP!" Nick cried, leaping up and almost falling as Schanke reached out to him. The darker man froze, his hand half-extended, fear and hurt in his eyes. Nick caught himself with a hand to the wall.

He edged away from his friend, his face filled with pain and regret. "Schank -- I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But right now, it's too dangerous for you to get close to me. I'm weak from the wound and the healing, so I'm craving blood and the smell of yours, even from there is... almost... overpowering. If I wasn't used to dealing with the Hunger, I wouldn't be able to keep away from you. I'm sorry."

Schanke rubbed his face, fear and pain lodging deep in his eyes. But his voice was soft as he spoke. "Sure, Nick. Hey, you saved my life -- again. I don't know a way to say thanks that seems powerful enough."

"I think you just did." Nick leaned against the wall, smiling. Schanke thought his friend's face could define pallor, composed only of prominent bones with dark hollows between them. But Nick's blue eyes smiled out of the bruised rings around them. "It was worth it."

Schanke shook his head. "I don't see how. Will you be all right?"

"Eventually. But we don't have time to wait. We've got to get out of here and find the others." Nick moved toward the door, holding one hand against the wall.

Schanke caught a deep breath, as though coming up out of deep water, and moved aside to let him pass. "Yeah... uh, right. Did you come alone?"

"No... but I didn't know who to trust in the department, till we found the mole. It was Mark Baker, by the way." Nick made it to the door and stood panting a moment.

"Captain Baker?" Schanke repeated incredulously, watching Nick work the doorknob.

"Yeah. Before I knew, I thought I was on my own until a friend of Tessa Noèl's and Richie Ryan's came to the station. Turns out he's an old friend of mine, too, Schank, from way back. Duncan MacLeod -- a real martial artist and a former soldier." Nick shrugged. "I signed him up. He's here somewhere, trying to find LeNoir. We've got to find our friends, get them out and help Duncan."

Nick pushed one hand against the doorjamb and pulled the doorknob, but nothing happened. His head fell against the door, as he continued to pant. He pulled again, but still nothing.

"Uh... this may be a stupid question, but I thought you... I thought vampires were supposed to be super strong?"

Nick sighed. "We are, usually. But the blood loss and healing have drained my strength, so it may take a minute."

"Oh, yeah... sorry." Schank's voice was sheepish. "I didn't realize you could be so vulnerable."

"Oh, yes." Nick took a deep breath after his moment's rest. He wrapped both hands around the doorknob and pulled. "We are amazingly vulnerable--"

He fell back as the whole door ripped screaming from its hinges. Nick caught himself and propped the door against the wall. Panting and holding the wall, he looked back at Schanke.

"--to be so strong."

He pulled his duster closed and buttoned it as best he could over the bloody tatters of his shirt, then turned and walked haltingly out. Schanke followed, his mouth still open, studying the door as he passed it. "Yeah -- whatever you say, Nick"

* * * * *

"Anybody in there?" Richie called softly, for what seemed to him the twentieth time. He rapped gently at the door and turned the knob. This one opened. Richie swung the door inward, quietly calling, "Tessa? Natalie? Schanke?"

At a flick of the light switch, Richie found the room to be empty. But as he was closing the door, he heard sounds from up the hall -- a thumping at one of the doors up ahead.

"Richie?" he heard a woman's voice calling. "Is that you?"

The blond young man strode quickly towards the sound of the voice. "Natalie? Tessa?"

"It's Natalie, Richie!" she called again, and now Richie pinpointed the door. Running the last few steps to it, he called, "I'm here, Natalie. I'll get you out!"

Richie wedged the short, slender board down through his belt to free his hands. He pushed at the doorknob but it seemed this casing was sounder than the one in his former cell. He was rifling his pockets for something he could employ in picking the lock when cold, hard steel pushed against the side of his neck and a voice said, "Stand up real slow, raise your hands, and move away from the door, boy."

Still bent over the lock, Richie said, in a placating voice, "Sure man, take it easy."

"You take it easy, little man. I'm the one with the gun," the unseen guard said contemptuously.

Richie started to rise, his right hand, which was hidden from the guard, reached for the board at his belt. Suddenly, all in one motion, he pulled the board from his belt as he swung to the left. His left arm came up in the same motion and knocked the gun away just as the guard's finger tightened on the trigger. As the bullet ripped into the wall with an deafening explosion, Richie's right hand swung around and struck the guard with an audible crack right in the head. The board was ripped out of Richie's hand as the guard fell heavily. It took Richie a moment to realize that the side of the board to strike the guard was the one with the nail protruding from it.

Richie swallowed the rising bile in his throat as he stared at the widening pool of blood beneath the man's head. He suddenly realized Natalie was screaming his name.

"Natalie -- it's okay! I'm all right!"

"Thank God! What the hell happened out there?"

"I had an... unwanted interruption." Richie's hands began to shake as he bent down to check the dead man's pockets. He wondered if Duncan still felt the same way after he had killed. If so, Richie didn't know how he stood it. For all the trouble he'd been in at one time, Richie had never killed a man. He hoped fervently this one would be the first and the last.

"Richie -- what's happening?"

A jangling rattle in the second pocket he checked rewarded his search and Richie pulled out a set of keys. He looked once more at the dead man, then stood and walked to the door.

"I found some keys, Natalie... let me see if we can find a match."

Luckily, it seemed there were so many keys to use in the chateau that labels had been required to keep them all straight. After picking through several to different parts of the chateau, Richie found one labelled, "M".

"Master?" he whispered, and tried the key in the lock. It turned with the satisfying click of the bolt being shot. He pulled the door open and Natalie stepped out and into his arms.

"Oh, Richie -- thank God! Are you all right?" she said faintly, glancing down at the body sprawled on the floor, then back up at the pale face above her.

"Yeah... I guess," he replied quietly. "Natalie -- I know you don't know me very well, but I didn't mean it to turn out this way." He indicated the man at his feet.

"After what we've all been through together, I know you well enough to be certain of it," Natalie stated firmly. "Are you going to be okay?"

He nodded, then knelt and picked up the gun. "I will be," he replied quietly. "Let's find our friends."

"Good. Can you find your way back to the stair that was near the room we were all in originally?"

"Yeah, I think so -- why?"

"They must have decided to move you about the time I was being brought back in. As I was being brought down here, I looked down a corridor and saw Tessa being put into a room a long way down the hall--"

"Did she look okay?" Richie asked quickly.

Natalie nodded. "She looked fine." She did not mention the guard's coarse handling of his friend, their ribald comments to their promises of what they would do when their boss was through with her... Richie didn't need to know. *Just let us not be too late*, she prayed silently. Looking up at Richie, she said, "Let's go find her. Then we'll look for Schanke."

They sped off quietly down the hall.

* * * * *

I am Immortal, Duncan's thoughts flowed eerily in the blazing heat of battle. *Tasked, my strength renews; wounded, my flesh rebuilds; killed, yet I live.* He heard the litany in his head in Connor's voice. *Don't let the pain distract you, ye stupid ox. Stay focused -- your body will knit.*

He forced his aching arms upward to deflect the slash that LeNoir aimed at his head. His only comfort at this point was that he could never have parried if not for the fact that LeNoir was as exhausted as he. Another parry, another spin, another lunge, his breath wheezing like a bellows and his only awareness the laughing enemy before him.

For Tessa, for Richie, for Natalie, Schanke and Nick, Duncan knew he had to succeed. None of them would ever be truly safe with LeNoir still alive.

LeNoir pressed him suddenly, viciously, the strikes of his sword faster than sight. Duncan retreated step by step before the onslaught and knew he had to change the equation.

He glimpsed an object from the corner of his eye and without conscious thought he side-stepped nimbly, grabbed the chair beside him and pulled it into LeNoir's path. LeNoir danced out of the way as the antique fell forward with a brittle crash, but his foot slipped on a broken spindle and he was suddenly off balance.

Duncan was on him in a blur of motion. A lightning sweep of his sword struck LeNoir's weapon from his hand in a high arc that neither followed. Duncan spun around with the force of his blow and aimed for LeNoir's neck. The taller man ducked desperately, and the *katana* bit deeply into the wood of the broken chair. Cursing, Duncan struggled to pull the blade from its entrapment; glancing up, he saw LeNoir running to the one sword within reach -- a *katana* displayed with a suit of samurai armor, near the fireplace.

Duncan turned all his attention to freeing his own weapon. The sound of running feet closing on him almost distracted him, but again Connor's voice called him back. With a powerful final pull, the blade came free. A battle-honed instinct caused him to swing the blade in the same motion above his head, to parry LeNoir's unseen, killing blow.

LeNoir growled as his advantage vanished. Duncan swung away, grinning wildly. And the swords clashed again.

* * * * *

Richie and Natalie arrived at the corridor on the first level where -- they hoped -- they would find Tessa. Walking down either side of the shadowed hallway, they each tried the doors they came to, calling Tessa's name. At first they found only vacant storerooms. One contained cleaning equipment, another appeared to be a break room and yet another was outfitted as a small infirmary. The third door Richie tried produced results.

"Richie!" came Tessa's muffled voice from the other side of the door. "I'm here, I'm here!"

"She's here, Natalie!" Richie called the other woman excitedly, digging the keys from his pocket. "Okay, Tessa -- we'll get you out!"

In moments, Tessa was free and hugging them both. "Oh, I am so glad to see you! I was so worried about everyone -- especially since I heard a gunshot in the distance about an hour ago."

Richie pulled away and held her at arm's length. "Are you sure you're okay? They haven't hurt you, have they?"

Tessa shook her head and placed a hand on his cheek. "I am fine, Richie -- really. No one has done anything to me. Are you all right, Natalie?" She held out a hand to the other woman.

"I'm terrific now that we're out, but I want it to stay that way. Why don't we see if we can find Schanke and the way out of this horrible place?"

"Sounds like a plan," Richie replied. He glanced down the remaining length of the passageway. "I covered most of the lower level looking for you, Nat, and we checked the few remaining rooms on our way here. Let's finish this one and if he's not here, he's got to be in that long hall we crossed coming from the stair."

Natalie didn't ask what they could do if they didn't find Schanke in any of those places. She simply nodded and they proceeded with the rest of the corridor. They came to the end of it without success.

"He'll be down that other way, Natalie," Tessa comforted. "I just know he will."

"I'm sure he's there, Tessa -- probably taking a nap," the doctor replied with a smile, but her eyes were anxious as they started back slowly and quietly. Richie pulled back the slide on the 9mm he held,

loading a bullet into the firing chamber. They made their way stealthily to the intersection of the two hallways opposite the stairs. Richie motioned the two women behind him against the left hand wall.

As they crept toward the corner, Natalie and Tessa stopped and watched breathlessly as Richie peered around into the crossing corridor to test the water. When no shots or shouts were heard, he edged forward.

He beckoned them, but only for an instant. As they started to step closer, his motion changed to a frantic "get back" gesture. They flattened themselves to the wall as Richie followed suit, whispering almost inaudibly, "I heard something -- thought I caught some movement at a door down at the other end."

Carefully, he turned back to the corner and edged slowly to where he could just see around it. After a moment's study in the darkened hall, he turned back to the others with a gleeful smile. "It's Detectives Schanke and Knight!"

Natalie caught his arm as he was about to burst around the corner. "Stop, Richie! Even if they don't have weapons, you shouldn't jump out at them like that. They may not recognize you quickly enough."

The three waited impatiently as they listened to the footsteps coming slowly up the hall.

"Nick -- Schanke!" Natalie called, softly as they reached the intersection. The two men froze then rushed toward her. Amazingly, Schanke reached her first and caught her up in a bear hug.

"God, am I glad to see you, Nat! Are you all okay?" Schanke asked, including Tessa and Richie in his query as they neared.

"We're fine, Don, but what's wrong with Nick?" she asked worriedly, as the tall form came towards them slowly, almost staggering. Schanke looked back at him as though he wanted to go back, to help, but was somehow prevented. He turned to Natalie, not yet releasing her arms and looked at her so strangely, she thought.

"Nat -- Nick was wounded. Not... not badly -- just something you need to take a look at." His grasp on her tightened. "He's lost a lot of blood. He needs help. He's... uh... hurting pretty bad."

Natalie's eyes, fixed on Schanke's face, widened in shock as the meaning of his words and expression sunk in. *He knows, her thoughts raced wildly. Schanke knows Nick is a vampire! Which means Nick must have been wounded badly enough to--*

She couldn't complete her thought but nodded at him. "I understand," she whispered, and turned to walk toward Nick, leaving Schanke to deal with Richie's protests that they could at least lend him a shoulder.

As she neared him, she knew it was bad -- almost as bad as the pipe bomb blast that had brought him into her morgue and into her life five years ago. His face was waxen, his blue lips the very picture of cyanosis, blue bruises circling his eyes. Flesh had fallen away from the strong bones of his face, leaving it almost skull-like. She caught him as he staggered upon reaching her.

"Nat -- no! Not too close... your blood... the need is too strong--" Nick tried to pull away from her, but she held to him.

"I know, Nick," she replied soothingly, pulling his arm around her shoulders. "Just hold on for a minute. We've got to take care of this, or you're not going anywhere."

His eyes burned into hers, intent almost to the point of madness. Demon-gold danced around the edges of those eyes. "Natalie -- I can't... not this close. If I hurt you, I'd as well fly into the sun."

"I trust you, Nick, to the depths of your Hunger," she flung back at him with both anger and fear. "Fight the need for a few moments longer and let me help you."

She pulled him forward. Bemused, he followed though his remaining strength was still much greater than hers. As they neared the others, Natalie exclaimed, "Richie -- where was that room we found that had the first aid supplies?"

"Around the corner -- the first part of the passageway on the right. We saw it just before we found Tessa--"

"Fine." As she pulled Nick past them, she noticed that he kept his head lowered, and she wondered if it was due to his weakness or because he could not keep the flame out of his eyes now. "Take Tessa and Richie and wait for us in that alcove under the stairs. I must get Nick patched up, or he won't be able to move."

Schanke stepped closer and caught her arm. His voice lowered to a point that only she could hear, he implored, "Natalie, are you sure? I know it's Nick -- I want him to be okay, but what about you?"

"Nick would never hurt me," she shot back at him fiercely. "Please, Don, I know what I'm doing. It's Nick's life!"

He hesitated only a moment longer, glancing over at Nick's bowed head, then let her go. "Take care of him. Just be careful."

"I will," she promised with a quick smile, then pulled Nick on as Schanke turned back to the others with glib explanations.

They rounded the corner and after one wrong door, Natalie found the room that housed the first aid supplies. Snapping on the light and pulling Nick in after her, she closed the door behind them.

"It's okay, Nick. We're here." She pushed him into a chair and began scrambling through the drawers and cabinets.

"What good will it do?" Natalie heard Nick whisper, his voice raw as thought compressing screams. She turned and saw him staring at her. "None of these things can help me, Natalie... only you can."

He stood up and glided towards her. His blazing yellow eyes engulfed her with need and desire; his knife-sharp fangs gleamed with a wild, wicked beauty. The vampire that was Nick entangled her in a sensual, mesmerizing glamour.

Nick reached for her and all she could see was his fangs.

* * * * *

The battle between MacLeod and LeNoir raged on, the two Immortals waging a truly immortal contest. Both were dripping with sweat and blood. Wounds already healing on their bodies sparked randomly, surrounding each of them with a coruscating aura of power. Their strength rebuilt, but fatigue grew.

Duncan found himself fighting for his life, knowing without thought that he fought for the lives of all his friends. LeNoir gave him no opening; it was all Duncan could do to defend himself from the other Immortal's punishing attack. LeNoir fought with all the speed and skill imaginable of one of his immense age, power, and accumulated Quickenings.

LeNoir suddenly parried, swung around, and changed his sword to his left hand. Duncan smiled grimly. A few quick exchanges, and Duncan's grimness increased. LeNoir was obviously completely ambidextrous. The older man now struck blows with an increased strength that nearly overwhelmed Duncan's fatigued arm.

With an abrupt twist of his sword arm, LeNoir caught the hilt of MacLeod's katana and pulled it screaming from the Scotsman's grasp. Duncan ducked LeNoir's searing follow-through strike and scissors-kicked the older Immortal's legs from beneath him. LeNoir fell heavily but kept hold of his sword. Duncan was already up and running, searching for a weapon of any kind. In the leaping dance of light and shadow, he could not see where his own sword had landed. Nor were any of the other weapons displayed in the Hall within arm's reach. He ran for the suit of samurai armor, aware of LeNoir's pursuing footsteps close behind him.

Duncan pounded up to the samurai display and snatched the round, embossed shield away, ripping loose pieces of the armor that fell with an echoing clangor. he whirled, caught a resounding blow from LeNoir on the shield and pushed the Frank against the wall. Duncan spun and ran for the scattered remains of an antique chair. He scooped up one of the long, spindled cross-pieces and turned to face LeNoir's next onslaught.

The joints of the old chair had been brittle, but Duncan found that the ancient oak still strong. LeNoir's sword notched the slender wooden spindle, but did not slice through -- not immediately, at least.

With his improvised weapons, Duncan fought on.

* * * * *

Nick's eyes were luminous seduction. Caught in their depths, Natalie felt only desire and a searing hunger. She swayed towards him, drawn deeper and deeper into the sensuous promise as Nick glided closer. His desire was her desire, his hunger her hunger.

Abruptly, she was ripped from the sultry, golden dream. With a harsh sob, Nick pushed her away and flung himself back, whirling away violently.

"Oh, God, Natalie," he groaned. "What am I doing? Get away, please! Leave me here, find the others and get out!"

Natalie was gasping for breath, wondering in stunned reaction if she was glad or sorry Nick had broken away. "And what about you?" She summoned the courage to look at Nick, but he was still half turned away. He leaned against a tall cabinet drunkenly, his fiery eyes veiled, pressing his head to the cool surface as though to keep the room from spinning before him. To her horror, Natalie saw a pink-tinged tear slip from beneath Nick's thick blond lashes and slide silently down over the bruised hollows beneath his eye and cheekbone and drip from his chin.

"If you are safe, I shall be all right," he whispered. "MacLeod is here... he may have found LeNoir. As soon as you and the others are safely out, I've got to find him... help him if I can."

"And how can you do that?" she whispered. Tears dimmed her sight of him; she dashed them away impatiently. "You don't have the strength to walk, let alone fight. How can you help him?"

"I can -- I must," he breathed. "Please go. Don't make this harder for me than it already is."

"That isn't my intention," she said firmly, stepping toward him. Something in her voice made him look at her. Natalie held up the scalpel she had found in her hasty search. She placed it to her wrist. "You've got to have blood -- I'm going to give it to you."

"NO!" In a movement Natalie's eyes could not follow, Nick was at her side, grasping the hand that held the scalpel. "I *will not* buy my life at the cost of yours. How can you think that of me?"

She smiled up at him, pride in him evident through the tears in her eyes. "I don't. You have come so far and made my belief in you so strong, I think you can change the equation. I believe you can drink enough of my blood to be able to function... and leave me alive and able to do the same."

"How can you believe that of me when I can't believe it of myself? I could kill you without meaning to."

"I would rather die at your hands than LeNoir's," she replied. "And all of us might without you."

"I have sworn to never again drink from a human," Nick whispered, struggling still.

"Yes -- but this is different. You took before -- the blood, the life, by force or by spell. This is a gift I give you freely." She grinned merrily. "Think of it as a transfusion, Nick."

She saw his throat work, as though he tried to speak and could not. Though the vampire gold still burned in his eyes, the bestial flame seemed changed by purity and resolve. He nodded slowly and released her.

Without taking her eyes from his, she placed the scalpel to her wrist and cut.

* * * * *

Schanke stood at the opening of the alcove, fidgeting. He watched the hallway from which Nick and Natalie should come, wondering what was happening, what he should do. His thoughts kept going back and forth as though he was in a mental tennis match with himself. Nick the rock-sure partner of the last three years... Nick the vampire. Natalie, the logical, incisive physician... Natalie, a woman with a definite affection for his partner.

His fears suddenly demanded action. He turned to Richie and Tessa. "You two stay here. I gotta go see if Nick and Nat are okay."

Richie began to protest. "Not by yourself, Skank. Let us go with--"

"No!" Schanke replied hastily, not knowing what they might find. "The fewer of us the better. Stay here -- I won't be long."

He started to turn, but Richie caught his arm. "Take this," he said, handing him the gun.

Schanke weighed the possibilities briefly, then took the weapon, checking to be sure a round was chambered. "Okay -- you two stay back there in the shadows, and no one'll know you're there."

Tessa touched his hand. "Be careful, Don."

"Always. Stay put -- I won't be but a minute."

Schanke peered out of the alcove quickly, then crept quickly and silently to the corner. He glanced around the edge into the corridor where they had found Tessa. Seeing it was clear, he was about to go around, when he heard a creak on the stairs behind him.

He spun and found the red-headed guard on the bottom step with the sawed-off shotgun aimed at him.

"Drop it, pig -- keep your hands where I can see them."

Schanke obeyed slowly, seeing madness and fear in the other man's eyes.

"I shoulda iced you when I did your partner, pig," the man growled. "Too bad I didn't get him sooner -- I can't find any of our people down here, and it's probably his doing. I'm gonna find Monseigneur and let him know, but first I'll take care of you."

The man pulled the gun to his shoulder and cocked it. Schanke's thoughts raced, as he planned to throw himself one way or the other to evade the worst of the blast. Suddenly, he saw the redhead start and his eyes widen with fear. The gun fell slightly and Schanke tensed to move, when he heard a familiar voice behind him and to his right.

"I don't think so, punk," Nick said.

"YOU!" the redhead screamed, in fear and fury. He pulled the gun up towards Nick. Schanke dove and rolled, coming up with his gun. The shotgun fired, blasting a haloed crater in the wall where Nick had just stood. Schanke fired a split second later and the redhead fell, shot through the heart, the shotgun clattering to the floor from weakened fingers.

Schanke rose and walked over to the dying man. "That's for my partner, you bastard," he said, grimly. The redhead's mouth moved, but then his eyes glazed over and his head fell back. Schanke shook his head and looked up to see Nick at his side.

"Thanks, Skank," Nick said quietly. "You okay?"

"Yeah." He looked up from the body on the floor, and studied Nick carefully, then glanced around quickly. With a tightening of the muscles on his face, Nick seemed to interpret his thoughts.

"Natalie's okay, Skank. She's right here." Natalie stepped around the corner. She caught the wall as she took the last step to them, as though suddenly dizzy, but smiled at Schanke.

"I'm fine, Don -- really," she replied to his look. She pushed her thick honey-colored hair back from her face, and Schanke glimpsed bandages circling her wrist as the sleeve of her lab coat rode up. She saw the direction of his eyes and added intently, "We both are."

"I'm glad. Nick, I'm -- I'm sorry -- " he began, but was interrupted as Richie and Tessa came running up to them.

"Is everyone okay?" Richie asked quickly, panting. Tessa looked down sadly at the man near their feet.

Natalie nodded. "We're fine, thanks to Schanke. This guy just couldn't give up."

Tessa studied Nick's face. "Whatever Natalie did, it seems to be working, Detective. You look better."

"Thanks -- I feel much better," Nick replied. That much was true, but he hoped his bone-deep weakness was not evident to them. He turned to lead the way and had to clutch the wall as his head spun dizzily. "Now we've got to get all of you out of here before--"

Tessa caught his arm. "Wait! Detective Schanke told us that Duncan came with you. Where is he? Is he all right?"

"He was fine when we split up, Ms. Noël."

"Are you taking us to him?"

Nick slowly turned to her. "No, I'm getting you to a safer place." He saw the angry protest forming on her lips and held up a hand. "Please, Ms. Noël... Tessa. Duncan sent his love to you and to Richie, but instructed me to get you both away."

"Nick, please take me to him!" she begged. Nick took her arm and led her a little distance away from the others. He took her shoulders gently.

"Tessa, when we split up, Mac went to meet LeNoir -- and you know what that means."

Her eyes widened. "It would seem that you also know."

He nodded. "I know that it means that *there can be only one*. We both want that one to be Duncan. If you come in on that fight, his fear for you safety could distract him -- fatally. Please, let me get you out of here, then I'll go back for him."

She searched his face, the truth of his words sinking in. Finally, she nodded. Nick motioned the others forward and led the way through the strangely deserted halls.

"I don't understand this," Richie stated. "There were plenty of LeNoir's men in this place earlier. Where are they all now?"

"Mac and I put some of them out of commission when we first got here. I have the feeling he may have accounted for quite a few more," Nick replied with grim satisfaction in this assurance of Duncan's continued presence. "Also, the first guard we... interviewed told us that LeNoir had sent a contingent of his men off to take care of a problem which left him short-handed."

They arrived at the basement door where Nick and Duncan had first entered and stepped out into the frigid moonlight. Nick pulled off his duster and helped Natalie put it on over the thin scrubs and lab coat she wore. He grimaced at the rips and darkened remains of bloodstains as he pulled it close.

"Hey, don't worry about it for my sake," Natalie told him quietly. "I prefer not freezing to death." As Tessa and Richie helped Schanke out the door, she turned to them. "Everybody okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine," Richie answered. "This is like Seattle weather -- when it's not raining."

Nick stepped back to check his partner. "You okay, Skank?"

Schanke shivered, burrowing his hands deeper in the pockets of his suit coat. "I'll do, Nick. What about you?"

"I'll make it," Nick smiled. He pointed out the direction to the others. "Follow me and stick to as much cover as you can. There may be other guards Duncan and I didn't find."

As Nick led the way down a grown-up path between hedgerows, he noticed Tessa and Richie casting surreptitious glances at the bloody rags of his shirt and the half-healed wounds on his chest.

Just as well, he thought, as they traded knowing looks. *It's safer for all concerned that they should think me an Immortal.*

They made their way to a copse of trees near where the driveway disappeared into the surrounding wood. Nick stayed close to Schanke, fighting his own weakness to help his friend. Once they made the shelter of the trees, Nick stopped the group. "Stay in the woods for cover but keep close to the drive. In less than a half mile over this ridge you'll come to the gate. It won't be locked -- Duncan and I disabled the alarm and broke the locking mechanism. We just left it closed to appear normal. Turn right at the road. You'll find my car about two hundred yards on the left, pulled into an old farm access road."

"Wait a minute!" Schanke said, focusing on the intent behind these instructions. "What are *you* going to be doing?"

"I'm going back for MacLeod, Skank," Nick replied.

"Well then, I'm going with you, partner." Schanke pulled his arm from Nick's hold and started to turn. Before the turn was completed, he had to catch dizzily at a tree trunk to keep from falling.

Nick caught his arm again. "I don't think so, Skank. You're on your last dregs of adrenaline now."

"And you're not?" Schanke replied, his quiet fierceness for Nick's ears only. "At least I haven't been dead tonight."

Nick smiled and nodded. "True enough. I'm still a bit shaky, but then one of the benefits of my... condition is that I do heal fast. Let me do this. Besides, the others need someone with them."

Schanke replied wearily, "Don't patronize me, Nick. I'll go. But don't give me any more bullshit about being healed. I know you and I know you're not up to par. Just be careful, all right?"

"Sure, Shank," Nick replied, squeezing Schanke's arm with quick affection. He looked up at Richie, who stepped closer to take Schanke's arm. Nick handed the young man his car keys. "Stay safe, Richie."

"Yeah, Nick, you do the same," he replied. "And bring Mac back for us, okay?" He turned and began to help Schanke deeper into the wood. Tessa kissed Nick's cheek, murmuring, "Thank you, Nick." Then she turned and followed the two men.

"We'll be along soon," he called after her quietly.

Natalie walked into his arms, the dark coat enveloping her. She hugged him tightly, then looked up at him. "Skank's eyes are opened at last. I don't know if I can handle it."

"Me either," Nick replied softly.

Natalie pulled back and looked up at him. She smiled, trying unsuccessfully to hide from him her worry and her tears. "I know you must go, but please take care -- you're not well at all yet and dawn can't be much more than an hour away." She reached up and touched his cheek. "Our hopes are with you."

Nick bent and kissed her mouth, feeling the surge of the bond of blood they now shared. "I know," he whispered as he pulled away. "As mine are with you. Go, Natalie!" She squeezed his hands, then turned and ran off after the others.

Nick watched until they were out of sight among the trees. With a sudden leap he was in the air, but found he was too weak to fly the entire distance back. He landed and ran at mere human speed.

He reached the entrance, panting. His keen sense of smell caught a whiff of smoke -- too faint for human notice but apparent to him. A sudden memory of Duncan's plan to provide "some diversions" came back to him, and he wondered if fire was one of those diversions.

Nick ran as fast as his fatigue would allow through the lower levels. He thought briefly of the men he and Duncan had left tied and wondered if he should make certain they could escape if the fire spread. But a cold ferocity rose up as he remembered how those same men had remorselessly kidnapped, imprisoned and assaulted his friends. He decided to let justice fall as it may.

The smell of smoke was powerful and irritating as he reached the main floor. Nick ripped off some of the ragged strips of his shirt to cover his mouth as he stood for a moment deciding which way to look first. His decision was made when his acute hearing picked up the sounds of battle. Running in the direction of those sounds, he found his way barred at one point by the dense smoke and the distant whisper of flames invading the main section of the mansion from one of the wings.

Retracing his steps, he found a passageway that led around the worst of the smoke to a small stair. The clangor of fighting intensified as he climbed the steps. He pushed through a curtained alcove and came out into what he quickly realized was a minstrel's gallery that overlooked the Great Hall. But his concern with his surroundings fled before the sight that met his eyes.

In the sulfurous firelight and candle flame, two men waged a deadly battle in the vast room below. Nick recognized MacLeod immediately, his black hair steaming loose from its usual confinement and his battle-fierce smile flashing in the dimness. Nick knew his opponent must be LeNoir, and the hawk-like features recalling Merlin's photograph confirmed it.

Nick leaned forward with a sudden gasp as he realized MacLeod was fighting without a sword. He was using a Japanese shield and a small, carved shaft of wood -- and wielding them to good advantage -- but LeNoir's sword was like lightning in his hand. Nick could see that the wood of the spindle was notched and pitted from repeated strikes of the blade.

Aware of every blow LeNoir's *katana* slammed against Duncan's shield or makeshift weapon, Nick rapidly scanned the room. He felt desperate to help his friend, but in light of the prohibition against direct assistance in an Immortal battle, he was uncertain of what he could do.

Nick's thoughts raced. *Neither has his own sword and that katana LeNoir's using isn't Mac's. Both weapons must be somewhere close by, if only I could find one--*

The abrupt crack of splintering wood jerked Nick's attention back to the fighters in time to see the pieces of the shattered spindle fly from MacLeod's grip, the force of the blow shocking his hand. Duncan danced away from LeNoir with a grimace of pain. The taller man shouted exultantly and followed, raining blows that MacLeod blocked desperately with the shield.

Nick whispered, "No!" Stepping closer to the gallery rail to watch the struggling men, his foot struck an object that slid against the railing with a quiet metallic chiming. Looking down, he saw the glitter of steel in the alternate ribbons of firelight and shadow. The cross engraved just above the hilt proclaimed it LeNoir's sword -- the Crusader longsword Duncan had warned him about.

I had to find that one, he thought ruefully. A spark suddenly struck his wrist. He flinched, batted at the tiny flame, then turned to see the curtains behind him billowing with flame. Glancing down at Duncan, he took a quick breath and caught up the sword.

* * * * *

Duncan dodged LeNoir's strikes desperately. He searched for an opening, anything to use against this supremely skilled adversary. He caught a thrust on his shield, came up under LeNoir's swordarm and

delivered a side-kick to LeNoir's right hip. LeNoir fell, rolling. MacLeod danced back, putting the table between them as he searched for a weapon.

"Mac!"

The Scotsman whirled and saw Nick leaping out of a pillar of fire like an avenging angel. The vampire tossed a sword towards him -- a sword wreathed in tendrils of smoke and the bitter scent of burning flesh. It struck the floor with a ringing clang and coasted toward the fireplace. Nick fell like a stone and hit the floor rolling in the opposite direction.

Nick had not yet risen when Duncan glimpsed movement from the corner of his eye and was forced to turn back toward his foe. He pushed back his anxiety for his friend as he saw LeNoir leaping to his feet with a cry of rage. MacLeod veered right and ran past the end of the table toward the sword. He heard LeNoir's footsteps pounding fast behind him. He knew LeNoir could not catch up before he reached his goal - unless he came over the huge table.

LeNoir must have realized the same thing. Duncan heard a deeper thud as his opponent's feet landed on the solid wood of the table and ran across it. The approaching footsteps and Nick's shout of warning caused Duncan to dive to the floor. He felt the quick rush of wind as LeNoir's sword cut the air where his head had been a second earlier. Duncan rolled and his outstretched hand clutched the grip of the longsword.

He vaulted to his feet and spun around in one fluid motion. He swept the longsword in a searing arc with blind instinct. His powerful blow knocked aside LeNoir's descending blade as the Frankish warrior leapt from the table. LeNoir's stroke was deflected from MacLeod's head downward to cut deeply into the Scotsman's left thigh. Duncan barely felt the wound as his stroke completed its arc and sliced into his opponent's side. LeNoir's own Crusader sword slashed inward almost to his backbone, propelled by the force of his leap. Blood spurted from the deep wound as Duncan staggered back and LeNoir's forward motion ripped his body away from the impaling sword.

With a harsh cry, Lucien LeNoir fell to his knees, the *katana* clattering from his hand. Looking up with glazing eyes at MacLeod poised above him, he cried, hoarsely, "I curse you, to know the same loss I have known, MacLeod! See you hell!" He choked as blood poured from his mouth.

Duncan lifted the Crusader sword. "Don't hold your breath, LeNoir. *There can be only one!*"

And with a powerful swing of the glittering blade, MacLeod took LeNoir's head.

Duncan staggered as LeNoir's body crumpled and his head fell away. Gasping for breath, the Scotsman fell backward against the table's support as his wounded leg, still pouring blood, nearly collapsed beneath him.

He looked around anxiously for Nick and saw him slowly pushing himself to his feet near the ruins of the chair the combatants had destroyed. Nick was tattered, disheveled and appeared ill, but he was also all in one piece.

Mac's eyes met Nick's in a brief moment of anguish and exaltation, saluting him with the Crusader's sword he still held. Then Nick lifted the dragon-headed *katana* he had found when he had fallen. He returned the salute and tossed the blade, its sparkling whirl cutting through the smoky air. Duncan caught his sword deftly and held it outstretched in his left hand, the longsword in his right.

And then Nick saw his eyes roll up in his head and his body become rigid. An electric tingling on Nick's skin and pressure in his eardrums alerted him of the dangerous power building in the room. The Quickening was imminent, and Duncan's past allusions to them gave Nick no desire to be close. Weak and tired, unable to fly to a safer spot, Nick stumbled to the dubious shelter of a far corner as the first bolt of energy ricocheted through the room.

Nick watched LeNoir's headless body floating in midair and a ghostly luminescence poring from it to surround MacLeod's rigid form. Duncan's body began to quiver, then to shake as though in a seizure as blue-white spears of energy struck him. Other discharges of blinding power coursed through the room, causing the tall windows to blow out in a scream of broken glass. Brilliant streamers hit the suits of armor one by one, ripping them apart and hurling the component pieces flying with a din of clanging metal and shrieking wind. The changing air pressure seemed to pull the fire into the room. The flames crackled up from the gallery, caught the nearby tapestries ablaze, and began to lick at the beams.

Nick ducked soaring bits of metal and glass, to check Duncan. The Highlander continued to shake in the throws of power, his body limned by fire. Motes of electricity sparkled over his numerous gashes, especially the bloody cut in his thigh and the wounds began to heal. His face was contorted in a smiling rictus,

but whether of torture or ecstasy, Nick could not tell. A wordless shout was forced from his lungs by the storm that surrounded him.

The howling maelstrom slowly lessened. The thunder blasted one last time and spoke no more, the scintillating energy seared away into nothingness, and the gales of wind and power disappeared. Duncan slumped to his knees, his broad chest heaving.

Nick ran to MacLeod's side, desperate to get them out before the whole room should go up in flames. He could already feel the rising heat in the room beginning to burn his skin.

The vampire reached down with his left hand and caught MacLeod's arm, helping him struggle to his feet. "Come on, Mac -- we're getting out of here!"

MacLeod grimaced as his healing leg barely accepted his weight. He glanced at Nick's right hand, wrapped in shirt remnants, and held close to his chest. Duncan's jaw tightened. His brown eyes were full of gratitude as he met Nick's but he said only, "You'll get no argument from me. I don't suppose you could fly us out?"

Nick shook his head and gestured toward the doorway that seemed to be the least fiery. "That way, I think." As they started for it, staggering and supporting each other, he continued. "I ran into a bit of a problem earlier. Not much strength left."

Duncan then noticed the rags of Nick's shirt with the massive, barely healed wounds beneath and understood. "Yeah, I see why. I hate it when that happens."

They both laughed -- at the joke and at the bemused understanding behind it. Nick stopped for a moment to catch up the long coat MacLeod had dropped at the beginning of the battle.

"You know, MacLeod, I've got to hand it to you," Nick spoke louder over the roaring of flames as they pulled the coat over their heads as a meager shield. "When you create a diversion, you go all out!"

MacLeod laughed between coughs. "I'll take the credit - if we make it through this."

They plunged into the inferno of the front wing. Before they had taken more than a few steps, a huge burning beam crashed to the floor right in front of them. They jumped back, coughing and dodging goutts of flame. They were just able to get around one end of the beam, passing between a sheet of fire and the wall of the corridor. The passage closed behind them as the wall caught fire.

They finally came to what was once the grand entranceway but that was now a fiery hell. Duncan coughed rackingly as the smoke filled his lungs. He pulled Nick down and they crouched beneath the worst of the smoke.

"I've got to crawl for it from here," Nick shouted, over the fire's roar. "Not enough air up there!"

"I'll be right with you -- wait!"

Nick ducked out from under the coat's protection and dashed back a few yards. Duncan saw him dodge as burning debris fell from the ceiling to grab up two Persian rugs about the size of bath towels, stamping a small flame out of one. He ran back with both and draped one over MacLeod, the other going over himself.

"Go!" he shouted, falling to the floor beside his friend. The crawl was tortuous and heartbreakingly slow due to the great size of the room. The rugs were heavy and the heat intense beneath it, but it was better protection. The muscles in Duncan's left leg were weak and knotted with pain where the sword wound had barely healed, which made him even slower. Nick had gone ahead a few yards before he realized Duncan was not beside him. The vampire stopped and waited while MacLeod caught up.

"Don't wait for me!" Duncan shouted. "Go on!"

"I'm not leaving without you!" Nick shouted back.

"Damn it, Nick, I'll be okay! At least I'll heal if I burn!"

"I'd rather face the fire than face Tessa without you, so shut up and keep crawling! We're almost there!"

They reached the huge double doors moments later. Nick shouted, "Stay down!" and stood up. He caught the ornate metal doorhandle with the corner of the rug, which immediately began to smoke. He pulled -- and nothing happened.

"*Foutre!*" Nick shouted. "It's locked!"

Duncan spat Gaelic curses. "Can you jimmy it?"

"Yeah -- like this!" Nick replied. He tossed aside the rug and began to kick at the locking mechanism. Duncan had seen Nick pull large doors completely off their hinges, so he knew the vampire's strength was nearly spent when the blows made little impact.

"Move over!" Duncan shouted. He staggered to his feet, still clutching his singed coat but tossing aside the protecting rug. "We'll not die again today!"

Together they began kicking at the lock. The wood around the bolt began to crack, then splinter. Two more blows and the bolt broke loose from the fractured wood. Duncan yanked the door open with his coat-covered hand. They ran out of the doorway followed by a gush of flame -- into the bright rays of the rising sun.

Nick cried out hoarsely as the sun struck his exposed flesh and dove toward the meager shelter of a huge planter containing a formally clipped yew. His dive stopped a few feet short of the sheltering shade and he began to crawl towards it. MacLeod, following just behind, felt the heat of the greedy flames on his back even as he watched the smoke rising from Nick's blistering skin. Grabbing Nick's arm, MacLeod hauled them both across the remaining gap of sunlight and collapsed in the compact shadow cast by the planter and tree.

Duncan swept his tattered coat over Nick's nearly bare upper body. He raised to kneel beside his gasping friend and quickly studied the expanse of broad front terrace and long lawn for some kind of shelter. His hope was in vain, however, because the entire formal space was bare of any marked shade and faced directly east. The surrounding wood looked to be at least fifty yards away in every direction. He also couldn't help but notice the sanctuary of the shadow inexorably shrinking with the relentlessly climbing sun.

Meanwhile, the fire had been fueled explosively by the sudden new source of oxygen. Flames and smoke belched from the doorway, consuming the broken wooden doors like kindling. The windows began to explode outward from the speed of combustion inside. Duncan crouched low over Nick as shards of glass flew past. Blazes broke out of all the Gothic windows of the entrance, much too close to their small shelter.

"We've got to get out of here, Nick! Can you run for the trees if I help?" Duncan shouted to be heard over the maniacal roaring of the flames.

"I'll try!" Nick panted, grimly. His skin continued to smoke thinly, as though still lightly burning.

Duncan rose to his feet and leaned down to help Nick when he heard a different kind of roaring from up ahead. Nick's green Caddy burst out of the woods and screamed up the drive. It squealed around the curve and screeched to a halt at the foot of the terrace steps as Duncan waved it down. Richie jumped out of the driver's seat.

"Help me with Nick!" Duncan shouted to him as the young man raced around the car and up the steps. He gestured Richie to Nick's opposite side.

"Is he hurt bad?" Richie asked.

"Bad enough but -- uh," Duncan dredged up an old memory, "he's really allergic to sunlight, so keep him covered!"

Between them, they gently helped Nick up, holding his arms through the protecting coat. As they started down the steps, a closer window blew, sending jagged shards of glass over the entire area where they had stood moments before. As they approached the car, Natalie was already out, ripping off the coat Nick had given her a little more than an hour ago.

"Put him in the back, between Schanke and me," she instructed. The two men complied. Natalie jumped in beside him and covered Nick further with the ragged duster. Richie and Duncan slammed the door behind them and leaped into the front seat on either side of Tessa.

The Cadillac peeled out, leaving the flaming building to explode with its final death throes, consuming the evil it had housed...

* * * * *

Moonlight shimmered over the city of Toronto, the luminous silver softening the harsh edges and making it magical. The glow sent soft fingers into the unshuttered windows of Nick's loft, an incandescent benison to the laughing people gathered inside.

"And then Nick yells, 'I'd rather face the fire than face Tessa without you, so shut up and keep crawling!'" Mac continued and the laughter burst out again.

Tessa elbowed Duncan's leg, easily accessible as he lounged comfortably on the padded arm of her chair. With a wry smile she glanced over at Nick where he sat on the back of the couch above Schanke. "I appreciate your efforts for both of us, Nick, but surely I am not so formidable?"

Nick's face retained a trace of the severe sunburn he had suffered only thirty-six hours earlier. His strong white teeth seemed brighter against the color as he smiled back and raised his glass to her. Tessa, in every right way, you are *très formidable*."

"Well, I for one don't see how you made it out of there alive." Schanke shook his head as he refilled his plate from the selection of cheeses, breads and fruit spread on the coffee table before them. "That place was an inferno! You both must have nine lives."

Schanke was too busy with his food to notice the guarded looks exchanged by the others in the room. Duncan glanced at Nick with a quirked, questioning eyebrow; Nick met his eyes briefly, shrugged wistfully, and looked away.

From her place by Schanke on the couch, Natalie spoke up quickly, anxious to turn the subject to less dangerous ground. "So the crown prosecutor is satisfied with the results of the investigation? You both were able to tie up all those loose ends to everyone's satisfaction?"

Nick began to speak but Schanke was quicker. Swallowing his food with a quick sip of wine, he laughed, "You mean like Nick being totally out of his jurisdiction, without a search warrant, and aided by a civilian? Well, you see, Nat, we decided it was easier all the way around if we just sort of... left out that part of it."

"And Stonetree? Did he buy it, too?" Natalie asked, incredulously.

"Well, I think he viewed our version a bit more... ah... leniently since you and Schanke were victims," Nick interjected. "The Captain tends to get a bit... irritated when his people are kidnapped and assaulted," Nick's eyes touched on the bruises still evident on Natalie's face, then continued, "Especially since it was due to the betrayal of one of our own."

Schanke nodded, pausing in his evident gustatory enjoyment. "Nick's right. Both the Captain and old eagle-eye Rouleau listened without a blink to my gallant tale. How the wounded," Schanke lightly touched the healing wound briefly, "but persevering Detective Schanke and his heroic comrades managed to take advantage of the bad guys falling out amongst themselves and killing their evil leader. How the heroes escaped from the castle dungeon in all the confusion and fought their way out. And how the castle burned behind them caused by some unknown but lucky circumstance. Lucky for us, that is -- not so much for anyone left in there."

"I think most of the guards got out," Duncan stated. "When Nick described a few of those that were picked up and are singing their heads off now, I recognized one or two that I put out of commission." His voice became steely, and a bit of a Scots burr crept back as he continued, "Of course, after what they did to the four of you, I'm not real concerned if some did burn."

"And neither Rouleau or Stonetree connected Nick or Mac to the chateau?" Richie asked from his place near Tessa's feet.

Schanke shook his head and put aside his empty plate. "Nick traced his steps through the investigation of Baker so convincingly that I half-bought it. Of course, Baker disagrees, but with the evidence we've assembled against him, nobody's listening much to what he says."

"Could Duncan have problems if Baker makes an issue of his being with Nick during the confrontation you told us about?" Natalie asked.

Nick suddenly became fascinated by the play of light in the crimson liquid in his wine glass. "Well, oddly enough, Baker doesn't seem to remember Duncan at all."

Natalie choked as she sipped her wine, then glared accusingly as Nick met her eyes with mischief in his own. He transferred his gaze to Duncan. "Just how hard did you hit him, Mac?" he asked innocently.

Schanke and Richie laughed, hearing only Nick's surface meaning. MacLeod, aware of Tessa's relieved but puzzled study of both their faces, sent Nick a speaking look, but could not help grinning. "Not nearly as hard as I could've, Nick!" he answered meaningfully. He tapped his glass. "More wine, maybe?"

Nick chuckled, rising. "Sure, Mac."

Natalie rose also, snatching some of the empty plates. "I'll take these and serve dessert now."

Schanke grabbed several of the plates and stood also, grinning with anticipation. "Let me help you with these, Nat."

"Despite your poorly concealed motive, I accept." She loaded him down with plates and led him over to the kitchen area.

As Nick, Schanke and Natalie busied themselves in the kitchen, Tessa turned to look up at Duncan. "What was that all about?"

"What?" The Scotsman was all innocence.

"That business between you and Nick."

"Just what he said," Duncan replied, nonchalantly. "He thought I did hit Baker too hard -- several times."

Tessa studied him. "There seemed to be more to it than that. Maybe because I've been wondering about Nick. Is he an Immortal, or not?"

"Yes," Duncan replied, truthfully. *But neither of you need the danger of knowing what kind of Immortal*, he thought.

"Hey -- I was wondering about him, too," Richie rose from his spot on the floor and perched on the edge of the couch. "If Nick's Immortal, how come he has this sun allergy thing? I thought you guys never got sick?"

Duncan's mind raced. "Well, there are some variations every now and then. Even Darius, as old as he was, didn't know everything about Immortals. How can we counteract death, but yet not grow back a limb?"

"You can't?" Tessa asked, surprised.

"I don't know about myself. But I knew one Immortal who experienced it. And even though we usually heal without a scar, I knew another who came very close to losing his head, but the sword just barely penetrated his neck -- here." Duncan indicated his throat just at his Adam's apple. "He got away and healed but he bore a terrible scar and it ruined his voice. And also -- if our bodies can heal, why not our minds? Remember Michael?"

Richie snapped his fingers. "That's it! I've been wondering who Nick reminded me of..."

"Here we are -- dessert for everyone," Natalie's voice interrupted, as she returned bearing an enormous tray of tempting sweets. "Don has to wait until everyone else has served themselves!"

"Now wait just a minute--" Schanke sputtered in mock indignation as chuckles met Natalie's words. Nick came up behind his partner and put a hand on his shoulder.

"That's all right, Skank. You can get the first refill," the blond detective said, comfortingly. "Come take your pick."

"Thanks, Nick. Nice to know that at least my partner is concerned for my recovery."

There was laughter and more ribbing at this, and the conversation became more general. Duncan, his sweet tooth satisfied, looked up to see Natalie trying to get Nick to try a bite of cake. Nick refused her, but obviously cajoled her out of her disappointment. She returned to the group as the four former hostages began sharing reminiscences of their captivity that now caused a healing laughter. Nick turned and sat down at the piano.

Duncan rose up from his chair at the edge of the laughing group and walked to Nick's side. Nick was playing a haunting Chopin nocturne, which one Duncan was not sure, but it was familiar and evocative. MacLeod leaned against the piano, sipping his wine and let the music flow over him.

The nocturne ended. Nick met Duncan's eyes as though he was just registering his presence, and smiled faintly. As Nick reached for his glass of crimson fluid on the piano, Duncan spoke quietly. "You made Schanke forget, didn't you?"

Nick sighed and sipped from the glass. "Yes. I didn't want to. I thought he'd get over the shock a little and begin to realize I was the same person I've always been. I hoped our relationship could take it. But he couldn't, and I saw it in his eyes, in his reticence around me. I think it would have only gotten worse. And I knew that we couldn't work that way, not as cops. For all our differences, Schanke and I have done well as partners because we knew we could trust each other completely."

Duncan studied Nick with compassion in his eyes. "I'll bet that wasn't your only reason."

Nick met Duncan's gaze with a wistful grin. "No. I liked the fact that he treated me as a mortal friend. A slightly weird friend that he frequently shook his head over, but a friend nevertheless. He helped me feel a lot younger. I didn't want to lose that relationship, either."

MacLeod nodded. "I can understand that feeling. I think you did the right thing."

"The lesser of two evils, maybe," Nick replied, glancing at Schanke with a hint of sorrow in his eyes. He took a deep breath and looked back at MacLeod. "Speaking of evil, we think LeNoir's empire will be completely broken and brought to justice. There are several of his lieutenants who are turning over evidence for lighter sentences. The busts have already started."

"That's good. Maybe Melisande can rest in complete peace now that LeNoir can no longer harm other innocents," Duncan answered.

Something about his manner made Nick ask, "But you're not certain?"

MacLeod glanced at Nick with a rueful smile. "I know what you're going to say, but I can't seem to forget what LeNoir said to me just before I took his head."

"What was it? Did he curse you with his dying breath?" Nick asked, with a chuckle. When MacLeod looked at him sheepishly, Nick exclaimed, "You're not serious, Mac! We're in the twentieth century now. We both left beliefs like that behind at least two hundred years ago."

"Yeah, I know it sounds silly," Duncan replied with a weak laugh. "But then so does the idea of vampires and Immortals who cut each other's heads off with swords. And my kinsman Connor warned me long ago that an Immortal's curse was not to be taken lightly."

Nick shook his head. "Ah, MacLeod, my barbarian friend! Okay, so what was LeNoir's curse?"

"That I should know the same kind of loss he had known -- I suppose referring to his loss of Melisande." Duncan's eyes strayed involuntarily across the room to Tessa.

Nick replied gently, "Mac, that's the curse you've lived under since you woke up from your first death. That's the curse of immortality. Despite knowing you would someday lose Tessa, you had the courage to love her, to risk your heart in a losing battle with death. You could still have decades together."

MacLeod smiled. "I hadn't thought of it that way. I guess I am still a barbarian at heart." He watched Nick scratch his hand absently. "By the way, how's your hand?"

Nick gazed down at the seamless skin of his right palm, a look of wonder filling his eyes. "It's fine. It burned like hell when I picked up LeNoir's sword, but when I thought to check it again, later, it was as though nothing had happened. The last time I was burned by a cross it took weeks to heal."

"Looks like you've been given a seal of approval," Duncan said quietly.

Nick stared into the distance longingly. "Perhaps. That may be a little too much to hope for." He shook his head and glanced at Duncan self-deprecatingly. "Any other loose ends? What about Tessa and Richie? Are they still accepting the idea that I'm an Immortal?"

"Yeah -- as long as you don't blow it with cracks like the one you made about Baker's forgetfulness," Duncan said, with laughing exasperation. "Tessa is smart and sees beneath the surface, like most artists. She could easily catch on to you."

"I know -- I'll stop already," Nick replied. He looked over to see Natalie and Tessa talking together animatedly. Watching them with a smile, he continued, "You know, Mac, of all of these centuries we've been meeting up with each other, I think you seem to be the happiest today."

Duncan followed Nick's gaze. "I know I am." His eyes turned to Richie, as the young man threw back his head, laughing heartily at some statement made by the wildly gesturing Schanke. "It feels as though I'm part of a family again after three hundred and fifty years." The Highlander leaned his elbows on the piano, cradling his glass between his hands. "I think I see the same thing in you."

Nick nodded. "I've got two very special friends, one who cares for me for what I am, and one who cares for me because of what I should be. Maybe someday, between the two of them, I'll make it."

"It's worth it after all, isn't it, Nick?"

"What?"

"Giving hostages to fortune. Risking devastating pain to love."

Nick nodded. "Yes, it's worth it -- to get 'a place to stand and love in for a day,' despite the 'darkness and the death hour rounding it.' In fact, I think that's what makes the feeling all the more precious."

MacLeod grinned and punched Nick's shoulder. "Okay, if you're going to start quoting Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I'm outta here."

Nick grinned back but caught MacLeod's arm. "Okay, Mac, but before we rejoin the others, I wanted to tell you thanks -- thanks for everything. I couldn't have gotten them back without you."

"Yeah, it's always good to have a mad Scot around to burn the house down around your ears," Duncan replied. Nick chuckled and shook his head. MacLeod looked down at the toes of his boots, his voice quieter. "It was thanks to you, Nick, that we found them at all. Now that our friends are safe, I've only just realized how good it's been to be with you in this time. It hasn't always been easy, but I want you to know you're a good friend."

Duncan's gaze returned to Nick, as the blond stood and held out his arm. MacLeod reached out and they clasped forearms in the warriors' grip. "It's the same here, Mac, thanks," Nick replied warmly. Irrepressibly, he continued, "We should try to get together a little more often than every fifty years, though."

They both laughed, clapping each other on the back. Their laughter attracted the attention of the louder group in the center of the room. "Hey, come on you guys," called Richie. "You gotta hear this!"

"On our way," MacLeod answered, with a grin to his young friend. Duncan turned back to Nick. "Well, Nick, shall we rejoin our 'hostages'?"

"Always, Mac." Nick gripped Duncan's shoulder and pushed him gently towards the warmth and laughter of their bright circle of friends.

COMES WINTER

by Maddog

the mirror tells me
the horses have run their course
and nothing will bring the years back
my hair is gray and faded
yours still the color of the sun
the sun you never see, Nicholas
I'm sorry
I couldn't make you human
let you see the flowers in the day
a rainbow against the skyline
a child with your eyes
ah, Nick, we never danced
until after dawn
may you find your dream
but for now, go
to new friends,
a new life
how many lives you've had
and I've but this fading one
go now,
before I change my mind
and give in to temptation
to stay with you in darkness
go now,
the dawn is coming
and I wish to see it one last time

ON THE WINGS OF THE KNIGHT

by Denyse M. Bridger

On the wings of the knight
Death holds no dominion

Life eternal is the gift
His kiss offers

Soulless eyes haunt forever
Peace remains ever elusive

Passions unholy
Burn brighter than the sun

Thirst for life
The justification for murder

On the wings of the knight
My spirit rose and was freed

Within the heart of my knight
Death holds dominion

Life eternal is the curse
Of which he fights to be free

